



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 12 April 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING – WEEK 2, GOSPEL TRUTH

1 Corinthians 15:12-34

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

²⁹Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³²What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

1. INTRODUCTION – THE GOSPEL TRUTH DEFENDED

a. Gospel grounded

1 Corinthians 15 is the Apostle Paul's response to a church embroiled in doctrinal and moral error. Throughout the letter we see that the church has been led astray by competing factions ('I follow Paul or I follow Apollos or I follow Cephas', 1 Corinthians 3), sexual immorality (chapter 5), a blatant disregard for fellow believers (for example, 8:11) and unbelievers coming into the church (for example, 14:23).

It appears that wrong thinking underpins much of this wrong living, and so Paul addresses their arrogant sense of superiority,

1 Corinthians 4:8

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

And later, there misunderstanding of what it means to be truly spiritual,

1 Corinthians 14:37

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

Against this backdrop of reproof, exhortation and correction, chapter 15 stands as pivotal. Paul reminds his fellow believers of the gospel truth,

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

¹Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ²and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

As we considered last week, Paul reminds his brothers and sisters that their grounding in the gospel is rooted in the past, they *received* the gospel; grounded in the present, they *stand* in the gospel; and looks towards a future consummation, their ultimate salvation is secured upon their *holding fast* to the gospel.

Similarly, Paul explains that the gospel itself is founded upon a historic event,

1 Corinthians 15:3b-4

...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

Paul continues, from verse 12, by explaining that this historically grounded gospel also anticipates future consummation.

b. Gospel truth challenged

1 Corinthians 15:12

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

As we read Chapter 15, it becomes clear that a faction within the church is denying a future resurrection of believers. This is important to note. Often times 1 Corinthians 15 is taken as a defence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is used to argue apologetically for the truthfulness of the gospel account. Now this is not entirely inappropriate, it is important, however, to recognise Paul is addressing opponents who propose 'that there is no resurrection of the dead.

One must always exercise great care when reconstructing context from fragmentary evidence. Paul does not explain the precise position of his opponents or the exact nature of this false teaching.

It is clear, however, that the prospect of a future bodily resurrection was totally alien to the prevailing pagan world view. It is most likely, therefore, that in a predominantly Gentile congregation in an area notorious for idol worship, the idea of a bodily resurrection was mostly at odds with their belief system prior to coming to faith and was almost certainly derived entirely from Paul's teaching.

It is further likely that this denial of a future resurrection relates to the Corinthians' misunderstanding of what it meant to be spiritual. It is possible that they looked at the manifestation of tongues and other spiritual gifts and believed that they had received all that is promised in Christ and were, in a sense, living in a resurrected 'spiritual' state.¹

Consider then how Paul sets about correcting this misunderstanding.

c. Gospel truth defended

1 Corinthians 15:12-14

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

Notice how Paul changes the terms of the debate: the issue is that some are denying a future resurrection, Paul, however, focuses in on the resurrection of the Son of God.

This is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, consider the nature of the error. It does not appear that the opponents of Paul were directly challenging the gospel foundations. There is no evidence that they were denying the person of Christ, his actual death or even the resurrection.

Taken at face value, it might seem that Paul is overreacting in spending so much time and effort on matter which initially seems peripheral to the core gospel truths. Paul, however, understands

¹ G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), pp. 715-717 & 740-741

that the implications of this false teaching strikes at the very heart of all that he sets out in verse 1 to 11. Paul understands that to deny the possibility of the future resurrection of believers is, by implication, to deny the resurrection of Christ himself.

There is an important principle at work here. Last week we discussed the importance of holding fast and contending for foundational gospel truths. All Christians hold to the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ, the God-Man came, that God *became* flesh. Similarly all Christians hold to the truth that 'Christ died for our sins' and that 'he was raised on the third day'. These matters are of first importance and so believers throughout the ages defend, contend for and proclaim these truths.

We must, however, exercise extreme care in dealing with other *apparently* less central truths of the gospel. It is good and right that Christians should seek to live in peace with one another and Scripture does exhort us to avoid pointless controversy. It is, however, sadly true that some believers avoid taking a stand on gospel issues because they are afraid of conflict. In such circumstances it is too easy to dodge the issue and disengage from the battle with a shrug of the shoulders in expectation that the truth will out in the end.

Paul however understood the gospel deeply and, as such, recognised the implications of this false teaching. He understood that to deny a future resurrection of the dead would eventually lead to a challenging, and perhaps dismissal, of Christ's resurrection. He further saw that such teachings impacted in a very real way upon the lives of behaviour of believers in Corinth (Paul addresses this directly from verse 29).

It is important to note that believers must show wisdom in dealing with error to ensure that the central truth of the gospel is not undermined no matter how subtly or indirectly. We rightly defend foundational gospel truths. It is important, however, that we are sensitive in dealing with *seemingly* peripheral issues to ensure that we do not allow the gospel to be eroded from the edges.

Secondly, note how Paul deals with error. Now when I talk about the Corinthian error, I talk about it in the broadest possible terms. As we read the chapter, we will discover that Paul strongly hints that much of the moral degeneration of the Corinthian believers is rooted in this over-realised eschatology and over emphasis with the now. Paul corrects error with the gospel.

This is so important for believers to understand. You and I, whether in the home, with our friends and family, in church or in ministry, find ourselves having to confront moral and doctrinal error. We must be careful to follow Paul's example to apply the gospel to every situation.

To the person struggling with very real temptation and sin, we must point them towards the sufficiency of the cross and the promise of new life in Christ. To the couple struggling in their marriage, we must point them to the example of the cross in which Christ, the perfect husband, dies for the good of his wife, the church. To the employee unhappy in their job, perhaps facing injustice and hardship on account of their faith, we point to Christ who took the role of a servant and humbled himself even to death.

Paul understood and we must be reminded that the gospel is the solution to every problem, because, at its heart, every problem is a sin problem and the answer and solution to the sin problem is found in the death and resurrection of the Son of God.

And so Paul answers this error by pointing believers to the resurrection of Christ and the hope that we have in him.

Thirdly, consider the way in which Paul defends the gospel position: he argues systematically and logically. Again this is important as this stems from Paul's conviction that the gospel is historically, objectively and verifiably true.

The sad truth is that Christians so rarely defend the gospel in this way because we lack confidence in our position. Paul applies logic to the gospel confident that the gospel can bear such scrutiny and so must we.

Paul points toward nine foundational truths regarding the resurrection of Christ.

2. THE GOSPEL TRUTH EXPLAINED

a. Hope grounded

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul understands that the denial of a future resurrection of believers denies the historic resurrection of Christ and that such a denial utterly dismantles the gospel. Paul systematically exposes the folly of his opponents' position by unpacking the centrality of the resurrection.

i. The resurrection of Christ confirms the truthfulness of the gospel

1 Corinthians 15:14-15

¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

Paul argues that if the resurrection did not take place, his preaching and our believing are pointless.

Notice the way in which Paul argues throughout this section in exposing the implications in denying the gospel truth of the resurrection. Paul understands that, in so doing, his readers will understand the centrality of this doctrine.

And so we must begin by asking why Paul's preaching and our believing would be in vain if the resurrection did not take place? Can we not, as one senior figure in the Anglican Church suggested, simply extract moral and metaphorical meaning from this story without accepting it as being literally true?

Paul does not allow room for any such a position and Paul will unpack the reasons for this through this section. Paul understands that the gospel so insists upon the truthfulness of the

resurrection account that to deny the resurrection necessarily denies the truthfulness of the gospel as a whole.

Conversely Paul understands that the resurrection of Christ both vindicates the Son of God and authenticates the gospel account. How do we know that Christ is who he claimed to be? Because he rose from the dead. How do we know that the gospel is true and trustworthy? Because Christ rose from the dead.

Christians must be reminded of this truth. Our confidence in the gospel is grounded upon the reality that we love, serve and follow a risen Messiah.

ii. The resurrection of Christ reveals the character of God

Paul's concern, should the resurrection of Christ prove to be untrue, is that the Apostles have then misrepresented God. This is crucial. The person and character of God is seen most clearly in the God-Man, Jesus Christ and the cross and resurrection. Should the gospel accounts be untrue, how can we then be confident with regards to the person, character and intentions of God?

In the cross we see the perfect expression of God's mercy, kindness and love and his holiness justice and righteousness fully revealed. In the resurrection we see the glory of the Son, the authority of God, over even death, and we see Christ utterly vindicated.

Acts 2:24

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

We see in the resurrection the exaltation of the Son of God,

Acts 2:32-36

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

"The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand,
³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool."

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

If there is no resurrection, either Jesus is not who he claimed to be, God does not stand for justice or God is unable to raise him. Either way we have a God who falls short of the God described in the bible.

Our confidence in the character of God is grounded upon what we find within the pages of Scripture and, most clearly, in the death and resurrection of the Son of God. We have confidence that Paul, Peter, John, Luke, Matthew, Mark, James and the other Apostles did not misrepresent God *because* Christ is raised from the dead.

iii. The resurrection of Christ confirms the effectiveness of the gospel

1 Corinthians 15:17

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins

The resurrection of Christ is evidence that his perfect, sinless sacrifice was both pleasing and acceptable to God. Christ is the sinless God-Man, this is why death is unable to hold him. The resurrection is an emphatic demonstration that, in triumphing over death, Christ also triumphs over sin.

How do we know that we can receive forgiveness? Through the cross and the resurrection. How do we know that we can live a new life totally unlike the life we lived before? Through the cross and the resurrection. How can we have confidence that we can overcome in our struggle against sin, weakness and temptation? Through the cross and resurrection.

iv. The resurrection of Christ confirms our hope in him

1 Corinthians 15:18-19

¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul's argument is this, if there was no resurrection then all that we have believed is a lie. For the believer this should be a most horrendous thought. This would mean that our sufferings for Christ, our mortification of sin and the repudiation of our former life were for no purpose.

Paul understands, however, that because of the resurrection we can have confidence that death is not the end because death was not the end of him. The Christian hope is, therefore, grounded upon the truth of the resurrection and anchored in the hope of a future resurrection of believers. Paul proceeds to unpack and further explain this gospel hope.

b. Hope explained

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Paul's argument thus turns emphatically upon the declaration, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead' and he explains the magnificence and scope of the resurrection.

v. In his resurrection, Christ sets in reverse the effects of the fall

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Paul argues in Romans that, 'as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin...' (Romans 5:12) grace and life came into the world through one man, Jesus Christ (v. 15-17). For this reason, Paul describes Adam as a 'type of the one who was to come', referring to Christ Jesus (v. 14).

In Romans, Paul has the present effects of the gospel in view. Through Adam, all mankind became corrupt, rebellious and depraved sinners and, as such, stand condemned before a holy and righteous God. Through Christ, those who turn to him in faith are justified and receive life. The result is that believers turn from a life of sin to a life fully alive to Christ and fixed upon righteousness.

In 1 Corinthians 15, however, Paul clearly has an eschatological intention in view.

The type still functions in the same kind of way. Adam, the first man, falls and all mankind are condemned to death. Death so enters the world. Christ, the new man (and, more than this, the God-Man) comes into the world and triumphs over sin (in living the perfect life and suffering an unjust death) and triumphs over death through the resurrection. In doing so, Christ thus sets in motion a reversal of all that occurred at the fall.

vi. In his resurrection, Christ guarantees resurrection to those who believe

1 Corinthians 15:22-23

²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

The effect of Christ's resurrection is that those who trust in him are guaranteed life now, Jesus says,

John 10:10-11

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

This is, predominantly, what Paul has in view in Romans 5. Here, however, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of the bodily resurrection of believers. Adam brought only death and judgement, Christ brings life and the promise of life eternal. In this way Christ is 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (v. 20). How do we know that the harvest of the resurrection of believers is to come to pass and how do we know that this life is not the end? Because we have seen the firstfruits in the resurrection of Christ.

vii. The resurrection of Christ is evidence of his present reign

1 Corinthians 15:24-27

²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.

Scripture paints a glorious picture of Christ,

Colossians 3:1

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, *where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

Hebrews 1:3

³He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and *he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*

Scripture assures us that King Jesus actively and sovereignly reigns over all creation, but how can we be certain that this is true? We look to the empty tomb, we look to our resurrected Lord and in doing so we see that, indeed, Jesus is risen and exalted.

It is important, however, we understand the reality of our present situation. The resurrection is the demonstration the present reign of King Jesus is breaking through. Scripture describes this, however, in terms of an advancing army. The enemy is defeated, but not yet utterly vanquished. At the cross, Christ struck the decisive blow over both sin and Satan and yet people still sin and Satan still has some limited dominion. In the resurrection, Christ struck a decisive blow over death, and yet people still die.

In this sense, the resurrection looks forward to something more glorious.

viii. The resurrection of Christ anticipates his future triumph over all things, even death itself

1 Corinthians 15:24, 26

²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. [...] ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

The cross and resurrection are the decisive, but not the final blow. The resurrection of Christ is crucial because it demonstrates and displays his mastery over all things, even death. The resurrection of the saints will be the final overthrow of the final enemy, death.

Paul has Christ's return in mind. We see death, suffering, pain and continue in our struggle against sin. When Christ returns, all this will end and, yes, it will be a most blessed day for those who are his, but, more than this, it will be the moment the utter supremacy and glory of Christ is revealed for all to see. On that day,

Philippians 2:10b-11

...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

ix. The resurrection of Christ anticipates the future triumph over all things all of which are intended to bring complete glory to the Father

1 Corinthians 15:28

²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

There is much here which is difficult to understand, Paul's point, however, is this: the arc of salvation history moves toward that moment when Christ is utterly triumphant and rules visibly and absolutely with every opponent, rebel and enemy utterly defeated. And then, in this moment of triumph, the Son hands everything to the Father, 'that God may be all in all'.

You and I, if you are a believer, are involved in a storyline so utterly magnificent that it stretches beyond our brief lifetime. Our resurrection is certain because Christ was raised. Our resurrection (and indeed our salvation) is purposed to put things back to how they were intended to be. Christ reverses the effects of the fall. Our salvation and future resurrection will bring glory to God and the result is that God will be all in all.

3. GOSPEL TRUTH APPLIED

1 Corinthians 15: 29-34

²⁹Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³²What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

Paul understands that right thinking leads to right living and, conversely, wrong thinking leads to wrong living. Having corrected the wrong thinking put forward by his opponents, Paul seeks to correct the churches behaviour. He does this by pointing to the effects of the gospel.

a. Gospel hope encourages perseverance

The life of the Apostle is one of persecution, tribulation and very real threat of death, Paul is in danger every hour (v. 30) and he dies every day (by which he means that he suffers terribly for the sake of the gospel, v. 31). The resurrection of Christ and the assurance of a future resurrection strengthen him, however.

The assurance that death is not the end encourages boldness in the proclamation of the gospel.

b. Gospel hope encourages holiness

Paul's struggle against sin is grounded upon the truth that there is more than just this life. We may sometimes ask ourselves the question, why must I go without when others indulge the flesh, pursue wealth and apparently thrive in their sin? It is important to remember that there is a lasting and greater reward for those who believe.

If it were not for the resurrection of the dead there would be no benefit in self-discipline and no danger in indulgence.

c. Gospel hope stems from and draws us into a greater knowledge of God

Consider Paul's condemnation of those who preach such a false and distorted gospel in denying the resurrection of the dead, 'For some have no knowledge of God.' (v. 34). This is brutal. Paul is saying, in effect, that those who deny the resurrection of the dead are, in fact, ignorant of and strangers to God. It is so important that believers grasp hold of this less we hold to loosely to the truth of Scripture.

Paul's point is this, if we deny the truth of Scripture which reveals these very things about God, we close our eyes, minds and hearts to the reality of who God is. There are people, sadly, even within the church who have compromised on the truth of Scripture and, in doing so, have recreated a 'god' in their own image. They truly do not know God.

There is, however, a great encouragement in this. In receiving, standing in and holding fast to the gospel we come to know God and, in knowing him, we find him to be altogether wonderful and altogether glorious. The promise of the gospel is one day he will return for those who love him and we will be with him. This, my friends, is the most glorious truth of all.

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