

The ground on which we stand

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[0 : 00] The reading today is 1 Corinthians 15, verses 1 to 19. You can find that on page 1156 of your Pew Bibles.

1 Corinthians 15, 1 to 19, the resurrection of Christ. Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

By this gospel, you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you've believed in vain. For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.

After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

[1 : 33] But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Whether then it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.

More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if, in fact, the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are, of all people, most to be pitied.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, good morning, and let me add my welcome to Alan's. I was speaking to Martin, our senior pastor, earlier this week, and he was telling me about how some years ago he'd been interviewed by the bishop of Durham for something or other. And during the course of the interview, he'd been asked if he had to preach on one passage before he died, which passage would it be? Martin, straight off the bat, said it'd be the first section of 1 Corinthians chapter 15, a great passage. In case any of you are worried, Martin and his family are away on holiday this week, that's why they're not here this morning. It'd be a great help to me if you'd keep your Bibles open at chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, and let us turn to the Lord in prayer before we get stuck into it. Let's pray.

[4 : 10] Father, we pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would come among us and do the work that only you can do.

Would you apply your word to our hearts? Father, we pray that each of us here in all our different circumstances and situations would know, would know something of your deep love for us, something of our hope in Christ Jesus.

For we ask in his name. Amen. Well, I remember hearing a story of a young man who'd become a Christian, quite powerfully converted from a difficult background, and within a very short space of time, months at most, he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and given just weeks to live. His family had written him off long since, and his only friends were the Christians who had brought this ex-junkie to faith.

And they'd seen him become a Christian. As these friends went to visit him in hospital, they were understandably nervous. How is his faith going to stand up? No sooner does he become a Christian

than he's struck down with cancer. And as his body began to waste away, they'd go in with more anxiety until it became clear that what he really wanted from them, his Christian friends, was for them to sit with him and read this chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, and to pray with him and to share about the love of Christ. There was something about this very chapter that enabled this new Christian to face head-on his own death, standing firm in his faith. And in doing so, he lived out Paul's command right at the very end of a chapter. So just look down to verse 58. This is what the whole chapter is building to. Therefore, verse 58, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that it's not in vain. We're in verses 1 to 19 this morning. We're thinking about the standing firm bit. It's about why. Why we can stand firm in the Christian faith. Why we can stick with it rather than giving it up. So just compare that command in verse 58 to stand firm with verses 1 and 2. He's reminding them of the gospel. They received it, they stand in it, they're saved by it, if, if you hold fast, unless you believed in vain. So those are the two options, if you hold fast or you believed in vain. You can either hold fast to the gospel and stand tall in it, or else you'll have believed in vain. And this idea runs right through our passage. A translation we use changes the words a little bit, so let me point it out. Verse 10, Christ's grace to [8:09] Paul wasn't in vain, not without effect. Verse 14, maybe his preaching was in vain. Maybe your faith is in vain. Maybe your faith, verse 17, is futile. Verse 19, maybe Christians should just be pitied.

So how can we stand firm in the Christian faith? How can we ensure that this is all not in vain? We've got two headings in the notice sheet this morning. First heading, since Christ has been raised from the dead, then hold firm. Second heading, if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, then it all falls apart. So firstly then, since Christ has been raised from the dead, then hold firm. There's basically two aspects to this part. Firstly, the resurrection is super important. The resurrection is important. The second aspect is the resurrection is true. It's based on evidence. And we'll look at these two things in turn. Paul's reminding them what they already know. Now at St. Silas, as we heard, we run the life course for anyone thinking about the Christian faith. It's a four-week course that covers the basics of Christianity. Our next one begins next month. So maybe you've not made up your mind about Christ yet.

Maybe you want to find out more. Explore what the Christian faith is all about. Or maybe you're a new Christian and wanting to ensure that you've understood the essentials. If that's you, we'd encourage you here to come to the life course. Well, that's what Paul's doing here. He's going back to basics and he's sending Corinth on the life course. This is Gospel 101. It's a matter of first importance. Now think about who he's writing to, the church in Corinth. They're basically pretty pleased with themselves. They're pretty pleased with their city, pretty pleased with their culture, and they're certainly pretty pleased with their church. After all, don't they have the best teachers in Corinth? Don't they have all the spiritual gifts? Aren't they simply the best church about? Imagine for a minute. Imagine you're at that church. Maybe imagine you're a Corinthian at that church. How would you feel if you were given this kindergarten reminder about the gospel? How would you feel if you're told, you need to go back to basics. All of you here need to go back to basics. Imagine the whole church receives an email through church streets and it's Martin saying he's signed you up on the life course. How do you feel about that? You need to go back to basics. By the way, I should add that the life course isn't a bad idea no matter how long we've been walking in the Christian faith. It's not a bad idea to get refreshed like that. So what's Paul doing here then? Well, he's concerned for them. He's worried that some of them are going to fall away. He's worried that some of them are going to hell. By this gospel, you're saved.

Verse 2. If, if, if you hold firm. See, it's possible to start well in the Christian journey, humanly speaking, but then give up. It happens. It could happen to any of us here. As a teenager, I went to Scripture Union camps with a group of friends summer after summer, about five or six of us. And every summer we went to the same camp, youthful and enthusiastic for the gospel. Out of that group, only three of us, I think, as far as I know, are still walking with the Lord Jesus, still following the Lord Jesus. And actually for years after leaving school, that was me. I'd walked away from it myself until the Lord brought me back to himself. None of us are immune. It's possible to start well and then give up. Paul says the gospel is made up of just a couple of things of primary importance. You either stand or fall on these two things in verses three to four.

[12:55] Firstly, Christ died for our sins. Secondly, Christ was raised from the dead. The gospel is centered on Jesus Christ. And the good news is that Jesus died to take the punishment for the sins

of those who trust in him. And he rose from the dead and welcomes all who will repent and believe to live with him forevermore. These are the non-negotiables of the gospel. The burial, verse four, confirms the facts of Christ's death. The appearances from verse five confirm the facts of his resurrection. We'll come on to those in just a second. Well, in the past year or so at home, we've introduced our children to the game Jenga. Many of you, I'm sure, will be familiar with this game, a game involving a tower of wooden blocks.

And players take turns removing one block at a time, and then each piece removed is put on the top of a tower. And we've been trying to impress on our children the importance of needing a solid base.

It's no good trying to build the tower on a soft carpet. You need a solid base on which to stand.

Paul's saying that getting the foundations right is fundamental to if we're going to stand firm. You need a solid foundation. And Christians stand on the resurrection. That's the first aspect.

The resurrection is fundamentally important. The second aspect is the resurrection is true. It's based on historical evidence. This is verses five to eleven. Of course, this may come as something of a surprise to some of our secular friends who think that faith is blind. But the Christian faith is not blind faith.

That's a misconception. The Christian faith is based on historical eyewitness evidence. That's what Paul's setting out here in this list from verse five. And by the way, it's not an exhaustive list. But the risen Jesus appeared to different groups and different individuals. He appeared, verse five, to Cephas.

[15:29] That's just Peter, by the way. That's probably what Peter's name was known by in Corinth, Jesus' disciple Peter. He appeared to Cephas. Next, he appeared to the twelve. Then he appeared to five hundred at the same time. Next, he appeared to James. Then to all the apostles. And finally, verse eight, Jesus appeared to Paul. Today, we rely on eyewitness evidence in our courts of law to make up our minds about cases of criminal and civil disputes. So let's think about the list that Paul presents here.

They have a cumulative effect, don't they? So many different people at so many different times and places, surely they weren't all deceived. These events probably all happened within a single year and would have only been a few decades at most before Paul's letter to Corinth. In other words, not all that long ago at all.

Most of these hundreds of eyewitnesses, verse six, are still alive. You don't need to take my word for it, says Paul. You can go visit them. Check out their stories for yourself.

Then consider the three people highlighted. Think about who they are. Peter, Jesus' best friend.

James, the brother of Jesus. And Paul, his worst enemy. Think about who they'd be for you.

Think about who they'd be for you. Imagine what it would take to convince them. James was so skeptical about his brother Jesus that he wasn't even a disciple. Not until Jesus appeared to him, that is. And then he went on to become a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul wasn't just a skeptic.

[17:42] He literally hated Jesus and persecuted the church, verse nine. Of course, all that changed when the risen, ascended Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and he encountered the living Jesus for himself. Last century, Frank Morrison set out to disprove the resurrection. He was so convinced that the resurrection is a myth that he set out to write a book who moved the stone to disprove it once and for all. Instead, as he examined the evidence, it led him to accept the validity of the biblical account. He became a Christian. Lee Strobel was an investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune, an atheist who got really annoyed when his wife became a Christian. He sets out to find the evidence to prove the resurrection didn't happen. You can read his story of coming to faith in the resurrected Jesus in the case for Christ. It's also a film. If you've not made up your mind about Jesus, you should ask yourself, what would it take? What would it take to convince you that Jesus really did rise from the grave? And have I really examined the evidence for myself?

If Jesus' resurrection was deliberately made up, it's hard to see how this could have been pulled off or why. What exactly could they have hoped to get out of it? All of Jesus' apostles claimed to have seen for themselves the resurrected Jesus. So they've taken a coordinated conspiracy to keep the story going.

But many of them were martyred for proclaiming the risen Lord Jesus. Jesus really rose. That's what Christians believe. The resurrection really happened. It's the foundation on which everything

else rests.

And we, brothers and sisters, need to be standing on that solid base and holding firm. Because if Christ has not physically been raised, then it all falls apart. And so this leads us on to our second main heading. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then it all falls down.

I remember being at a church service some years ago when visiting a rural part of Scotland. The setting, picturesque, the pews filled with farmers in their Sunday best. The sermon, absolutely woeful.

[20 : 45] Blasphemy. Blasphemously so almost. No connection to the Bible whatsoever. Just a meandering anecdote about discovering a rare butterfly while out for a country walk on the Kintyre Way. No gospel content.

No mention of Jesus' death or resurrection despite the opportunity that a butterfly would have provided for a metaphor. No hope for sinners. This, I'm afraid, is typical of churches up and down our land today.

I heard a stat this week that in one of our main UK denominations, 40% of the clergy don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus. 40% of the clergy.

Brothers and sisters, the resurrection isn't just nice to have. It's fundamental to the Christian message. Many people doubt it. Many want a Christianity without it. Many Christians try to dilute it. But that's not the problem we have in Corinth. Their problem is not that they don't believe in Jesus' resurrection. So the question remains, why has Paul gone back to gospel basics?

[22 : 08] He puts his finger on it in verse 12. And really this is the key to the chapter, verse 12. How can some of you say there's no resurrection of the dead?

They believe Jesus rose. They're on board with that at least. But some of them are saying nobody else will be raised. There will not be a physical resurrection of believers. But what Paul says is that you can't have the one without the other. The resurrection of believers can't be separated from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there's no resurrection of the dead, verse 13, then it stands to reason, stands to logic. Not even Christ has been raised. If you deny the former, you necessarily deny the latter. The one entails the other. He's saying it makes no sense whatsoever for them to be denying the resurrection of the dead if they are preaching the resurrection of Christ. Now remember the Jenga tower. The other thing with Jenga is when you're removing a block, the lower down on the tower you go, the more unstable this whole structure becomes. So you need to be testing it out first, prodding it and pulling at it. And that's what Paul's doing here. What Paul's doing in verses 12 to 19 is he grabs hold of the thing, he grabs hold of the thing that they don't believe, the resurrection of the dead. And he sees what happens when he pulls on that block.

And Paul confronts them with the consequences, therefore, of pulling on that piece of the tower. There's two logical arguments here. He shows them what happens when you pull it one way, and then he shows them what happens when you push it the other way. So that's his strategy here. Here's his first argument. Logical argument number one.

If the dead are not raised, verse 13, then Christ has not been raised. But if Christ has not been raised, verse 14, then our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. In 1952, the experimental American composer John Cage composed a piece called Four Minutes at 33 Seconds. A three-movement composition where the musical score instructs the performer not to play their instrument for the duration of the four minutes, 33 seconds. Its content is an exploration of emptiness and silence.

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching isn't even that. It has no content. It's useless, just chasing after rare butterflies. If the tomb isn't empty, then the gospel is. If Christ isn't raised, then death defeated him, and we can have no hope for our own resurrection. If the tomb isn't empty, then the gospel is empty. The result, verse 15, we're false witnesses of God. If Christ didn't really rise from the grave, then those who preach that gospel are no more than a bunch of charlatans.

[25 : 34] So we don't want to go there. We don't want to be pulling on that Jenga block that way. But what happens if we push it the other way? So here's logical argument number two, verse 17. But if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is in vain. You're still in your sins. And verse 18, dead Christians simply perish. The result, verse 19, Christians should be most pitied of all people. In other words, if Christ didn't rise from the dead, then Christians are pathetic. Why? Because then everything we stand for and everything we believe in is empty and false and utterly worthless, and we might as well carry on sinning. And what Paul's showing us, therefore, is that if you take away the resurrection, you're not just pulling on a block, you're kicking away the base. The entire thing

comes crashing down.

But here's the other side of the coin. If Christ really did rise from the grave, then our faith isn't in vain, and everyone who dies in Christ is secure. And so Paul confronts us with a choice. You, you have to choose, you have to examine the evidence, you have to make up your own mind. And something this important deserves and demands that we give it due diligence, due thought. Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the physical resurrection of believers? Do you hope for physical life after death? Do you accept him as your Lord and Savior? Or do you reject his claims? But for those of us who stand in the risen Christ, when the time comes, we genuinely can look forward to life after death because there is a real, physical resurrection of the dead. And we will be forevermore in the presence of our risen Savior.

I was speaking to another minister earlier this week, some time ago, many years ago now, he'd inherited a situation where they'd had four services on a communion Sunday. There was one such Sunday when the afternoon service was incredibly poorly attended. More people there who had to be there, the organist and the serving elders and so on, than the actual congregation of about five or six at most. And the minister there confessed to me that to his shame, in his office beforehand, he wondered why they bothered when there were so few people there.

But he knew when he walked into that service, that particular Sunday, he saw someone who he'd been visiting many times over the past few months, a young mum in her mid-30s. But she'd had advanced cancer and had deteriorated rapidly. The minister knew it had been a very great effort on her part just to be at that service. And she wouldn't have been able to manage one of the busier morning services.

[29 : 03] It was just a great effort on her part to be there. And he knew that this would certainly be the last service of worship she'd ever be at in this earthly life.

A sweet, harmless anecdote about rare butterflies would not suffice, would be of no help at all to such a woman. She needed to have impressed on her heart the rock-solid assurance that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is given to all who trust in him. The certain hope that we too shall enjoy the resurrection to eternal life, the hope of glory. Let's pray before we respond in song. Father, we praise you for the real, concrete hope we have and the promise of eternal resurrection life in the presence of your Son. Would you help us to stand firm in the risen Lord Jesus? keep us and guard us in our faith until that day. For we ask it in the name of the one who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.