

If Christ has not been raised, then what?

1 Cor 15:12-19

Tim Anderson 25/4/21

Today's Bible passage is essentially a negative Bible passage.

Some people don't like negative passages.

It reminds them of people who are always glass half empty,
never seeing the positive side of life,

full of complaints, lacking in joy, and generally painful to be around.

Well it's not surprising if you find negative people hard work.

But negative Bible passages can be a great joy.

Today's passage tells us seven things that are not true.

Now you might ask,

why do I want to know about the things that are not true?

Just tell me the things that are true.

Then I'll know what to believe.

But you see it's important also to spell out the things that are not true.

That way, when you hear one of them,

you know straight away that it's a dead end.

It's important to know what is not true,

because it brings what is true into clear focus.

Let me give an example.

Suppose Cherida and I decide to give our family a more healthy diet.

So we could tell our kids what is true.

"Hey kids, we've decided to have a more healthy diet."

Well they've understood the truth.

But it might not be crystal clear in their minds.

Telling them some things that are no longer going to be true

will help them to bring what is true into clear focus in their minds.

"Hey kids, we're not going to be having desert from Monday to Saturday.

We're not going to be buying ice cream anymore.

Chocolate is going to be a special treat not an everyday occurrence."

One you hear about what's not true,
then it brings what is true "We're going to be having a healthy diet"
into much clearer and sharper focus.
And it works the same way with the Bible.
It often tells us what is wrong as well as what is right.
It often tells us what we shouldn't do as well as what we should do.
What we shouldn't believe as well as what we should believe.
It makes sure we understand clearly what we are being told.

So we're in a chapter on the resurrection of the dead.
In past week's passage, Paul spoke of Jesus' resurrection.
Both he and the Corinthians were agreed on that.
The Corinthians however were not looking forward
to a physical resurrection of their own.
For Paul, our own physical resurrection
goes hand in glove with Christ's resurrection.
And in today's passage,
he's laying out the consequences of not believing in our own resurrection.
15:12 "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?"
That is the question that drives this chapter.
Some of the Corinthians were so excited about being spiritual,
they had no time for a resurrection of their bodies.
Their bodies were like goods dropped off at the Op Shop.
Something we had a use for once,
but now no use to us at all.
Once they died, they did not want their bodies back,
thank you very much.
They wanted to be spiritual.

So Paul gives them seven consequences.
Seven things that would be true if there was no resurrection.

So let's get into them.

1. 15:13 "If there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."

Hey, Corinthians, Paul is saying,

If you don't believe in a future resurrection, then you are undermining something we agree on: the resurrection of Jesus.

I looked down at my phone on Good Friday.

And some smug British academic had put on social media,

"Just in case anyone needed reminding today, dead men don't rise."

She was taking a pot shot at the resurrection of Jesus.

What else would the president of the UK humanists do on Good Friday?

What's her logic?

Premise: Dead men don't rise.

Fact: Jesus was a dead man.

Conclusion: Jesus didn't rise.

There's no problem with her logic.

It's faultless.

The problem is with her premise.

Dead men do rise.

Some rise to glory,

others rise to judgement.

But they all rise.

Dead men do rise.

So that's problem #1 with not believing in our future bodily resurrection.

If you just think something spiritual happens to us,

then you undermine the resurrection of Jesus.

2. Consequence #2.

15:14 Our preaching is useless.

Now you might think you've heard some useless sermons in your time.

But Paul isn't here commenting on the quality of the sermon.

He's commenting on the substance.

It's possible to construct some beautiful flowing oratory,

and it makes people feel all emotional inside,

but it's just words and it signifies nothing about reality.

Paul would say that's useless.

The ancient Greeks had schools of rhetoric,

where students for a fee were taught to give impressive speeches

that would move an audience.

Paul prided himself on not being like that.

This is 1:21,

"For since in the wisdom of God,

the world through its wisdom did not know him,

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached

to save those who believe."

All the highfalutin learned people came up with their theories,

and they did not know God through them.

But the apostles just told a simple story

about Jesus died and risen again.

And it was in the simple story that people came to know God.

What's useful preaching?

It's preaching that enables someone to know God.

What's useless preaching?

It's preaching that leads people away from knowing God.

It might make them feel all tingly.

It might sound very plausible.

But if people aren't led to know God through it,

it's useless.

Now useless preachers tend not to be honest.

They won't tell you they don't believe in the resurrection.

They'll say, "Oh yes.

I believe in the resurrection.

Peter saw a vision of the risen Jesus at the tomb.
That was a transcendent reality that filled him with new hope.
Jesus was risen in his heart.
The historical location of Jesus' bones was no longer important."
Well it might sound educated and reasonable.
But it's useless.
The Christian hope is not learning how to feel better
about the death of your friend.
That does nothing for me when I think about my own death.
The Christian hope is about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.
That's what gives me hope in the face of my death.
That's useful preaching.

Consequence #3.

15:14 "Our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

Their faith is useless.

If there's no resurrection from the dead,
their faith is useless.

Your faith, my faith is useless.

Sometimes people want to divide the world into two categories of people,
people who have faith and people who don't have faith.

You know, there are the secular folk who just care about money and fun,
and then there are more spiritual people of faith,
like Christians and Jews and Moslems and Hindus.

The secular folk can't see past this material world,
but the people of faith are inspired by something spiritual.

And so they can rise above the crass materialism we see around us,
and connect with other people on a deeper level.

You must have heard that kind of waffle.

It's very insulting to secular people,
some of whom do rise above crass materialism.

It's the wrong division of the world.

You can divide the world into two groups.

There are people who have a saving faith in Jesus Christ, and there are people who don't.

The people who don't might be Hindus, Jews, Moslems, or secular.

It doesn't matter.

The difference that matters is whether you have a faith that will give you eternal life on the last day.

That's a useful faith.

It a faith with eternal benefits.

Some sort of vague hopefulness in nothing in particular, or some sort of concrete belief in something that's just plain wrong.

Well those are useless.

And that's where we would be,

if there were no resurrection from dead.

Consequence #4.

If there's no resurrection from the dead, the apostles are false witnesses.

15:15 "More than that, we are found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."

Do you remember the story the Jewish leaders concocted about Jesus' body?

The soldiers told them about the resurrection,

and they told the soldiers, "Say his disciples came and stole the body."

Well let's imagine for a moment that the Jewish leaders story was true.

The disciples, disorganised rabble that they were without Jesus to lead them,

somehow managed to overpower the highly trained Roman soldiers, and make off with Jesus' body.

They slipped it somewhere that it couldn't be found.

And then they made up a story about how he'd been raised.

How long do you think that would have lasted for?
Maybe they could fill a stadium like Joel Osteen
and make lots of money
telling people about the resurrection story they made up.
Well no, that didn't happen.

What happened was that they were persecuted
for telling people that Jesus was raised.

Every single one of the apostles apart from John died not from old age,
not because they got sick,
but because the authorities put them to death
for preaching the resurrection.

Do you really think they would have been prepared to die
for a story they made up?

Of course not.

"Sorry guys, just my little joke.

I won't say it again.

How about we forget all about it?"

People will die for a conviction.

They will not die for a concoction.

The only way to understand the early church
is that the apostle were bearing witness to something they truly believed.
And what were they bearing witness to?

The resurrection.

The apostle were not advice givers.

They didn't spend their time
telling people how to live happy fulfilled lives.

They didn't deal in the seven secrets to a harmony filled marriage.

They were not running workshops on how to bring up teenagers.

They were not encouraging people
to install solar panels and use recycled toilet paper.

They were not advice givers,

they were gospel proclaimers.

And that gospel was the good news of the resurrection.

And that was good news they were prepared to die in order to proclaim.

Consequence #5

You are still in your sins.

15:17 "If Christ has not been raised,
your faith is futile, you are still in your sins."

What is the fundamental problem that the Christian faith corrects?

Is that that we are not happy,
and our faith makes us happy?

I remember a song we were taught at Sunday School.

"I am H A P P Y ..."

Is that what it's all about?

No. That's not it.

The problem is that we are stuck in our sins and we can't escape.

Lady Macbeth looked at her blood stained hand and said,

"All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."

We are caught in a problem that on our own we cannot escape from.

That problem is our sin.

Whether that's the sin of murder like Lady Macbeth,

or the sin of pride like me,

or the sin of ... well you insert your own.

We cannot escape except for Jesus.

And his resurrection is what demonstrates the escape.

If his death paid the price,

it's his resurrection that demonstrates he paid enough.

Otherwise how would we know his death worked?

Well the Corinthians knew they were not still in their sins.

In chapter 6, Paul reminds them where they came from.

These are the verses that got Izzy Folau into hot water.

6:9-10 "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, not idolaters, nor men who have sex with men, nor thieves nor the greedy, nor drunkards, not slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

And that is what some of you were."

They knew where they had come from.

And they knew that they were not there anymore.

The gospel rescues us from the power and the penalty of sin.

And the Corinthians had experienced that rescue.

They were no longer captives to their sexual urges,

their desire for possessions or the enslavement of alcohol.

They had been freed.

And none of that would have been possible without the resurrection.

Consequence #6

What happens if there is no resurrection?

15:18 "Those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost."

I've done enough funerals to know

that there's a big difference between Christian and non Christian funerals.

So much of what happens at non Christian funerals is denial.

I can't count the number of times I've heard Vera Lynn sing,

"We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when."

She was singing about her beloved going off to war, I think.

And she had a hope that he would return.

Sort of appropriate for 1939 when she first sang it.

But at a funeral, it expresses a vague hope

that there is something out there but I don't really know what.

Sadly, vague hopes will be found wanting.

If there is no resurrection,

then we won't meet again.

Paul tells the church in Ephesus what the situation was for them

before they came to know Christ.

Eph 2:12 "remember that at that time you were separate from Christ,
excluded from citizenship in Israel
and foreigners to the covenants and the promise,
without hope and without God in the world."
Without the resurrection of Jesus
and a living hope in the resurrection of Jesus,
that is where we stand.
Without hope and without God in the world.
Humming along to Vera Lynn won't change the reality.

I couldn't stand being a civil celebrant at funerals.
Day after day holding out to people platitudes
to help them console one another in the face of grief.
I don't want to give people a make believe hope.
I want them to have a real hope.
Hope that has a sure foundation.

That's the big difference at Christian funerals.
The hope has a sure foundation.
People grieve.
And the grief is somehow deeper and richer,
because people can afford to be real.
They don't need to play let's pretend.
They can fully express the cost to them of losing this relationship.
They don't need to hide from the pain,
because the hope of the resurrection
gives them permission to be honest about their loss.
You can be honest about your loss
when you have the foundation of a sure hope.
Make believe hope is dishonest.
Christian hope is real.

You get to this point in the sermon,
and you want to cry out,
"Can we get to verse 20 please?"
15:20 "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."
That's the message I want to hear.
I'm sorry, you'll have to wait until next week.
Are you feeling weighed down
by all this talk about what if there's no resurrection?
You are meant to feel weighed down.
That's the point.
You can't understand what glorious good news something is,
unless you understand how depressing the alternative is.
And so we get our last consequence of life with no resurrection.
#7 No resurrection means we are the most pitiable creatures on the planet.
15:19 "If only for this life we have hope in Christ,
we are of all people most to be pitied."
Now I have to say it doesn't feel like that.
I'm not interested in being the object of other people's pity.
My ungodly pride couldn't cope with that.
But actually, even without the resurrection, my life is pretty good.
I have a loving wife, five lovely children fast growing into adults,
I'm healthy, I can turn the heater on
when Melbourne looks like descending into winter,
I can ride my bike on the country roads
up around Balnarring and Red Hill,
and the beauty of creation is stunning,
Paul cooks me a yummiest curry than you can buy in a restaurant
from time to time,
my life on this earth is not so bad actually.
Am I really to be pitied if there is no resurrection?

Well we need to put ourselves into the apostles shoes.
There is a danger about reading yourself into a passage
that's actually not in the first instance about you.

Put yourself in Paul's shoes.

He was the stand out Jewish Rabbi of his generation,
the star pupil of the great teacher Gamaliel.

Had Jesus not come along
and knocked him off his horse with a flash of light,
and set him on the path to being an apostle,
Paul had everything this world had to offer waiting for him.

He was going to be respected and well paid.

A good job and probably a wife and kids.

Instead, God had other plans for him.

He was to go from city to city around the Mediterranean,
proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and Jesus' lordship over the world.
And for his troubles he was going to get flogged and stoned,
shipwrecked and jailed, ridiculed and despised
for the rest of his life.

He's passed up the possibility of marriage and children
for the sake of preaching the gospel.

And what if the resurrection isn't true?

Well he's given up a very nice life
for a life of suffering and deprivation for a lie.

Is he to be pitied?

Absolutely!

There's not much worse than making great sacrifices
for a cause you find out later is a scam.

You would feel totally ripped off.

But Paul is not in that position.

There is a resurrection.

Sacrifices for the gospel will be repaid abundantly.

MI 10:29-30 Jesus said, "No one who has left home
or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields
for me and the gospel
will fail to receive a hundred times as much in the present age:
homes brothers, sisters, mothers children, and fields,
and along with them persecutions -
and in the age to come eternal life."