

Faith that is Not Futile

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Date: 23 April 2006

Preacher: Megan Curlis-Gibson

[0 : 01] Good evening. Well, this is the first of a four-week series on the resurrection, and we'll be looking at the whole of 1 Corinthians 15, starting this week and then following on in the next three weeks. And you might have seen up the front here these funny folded sheets while there to remind us that the grave is empty and that the grave clothes have no body in them. And so we're going to be looking at the implications of that truth for our future lives. But before we do that, I want you to come back with me to the past. It's 1985.

17-year-old Marty McFly has just witnessed the first successful test of a time machine invented by his friend, Doc Brown. And just as the two of them are making a documentary video about the machine, a gang of terrorists turn up with guns to steal the plutonium that fuels the machine. Doc Brown is shot. And the only way for Marty McFly to escape is to get into the time machine and head into the past. He arrives in 1955. And to his horror, he discovers that he's used up all the plutonium and he can't get back to the future. He's stuck there unless he can find the young Doc Brown and convince him to help. But without realising it, he's also got himself into a much bigger problem, as we're about to see in the following two film clips. You see, Marty McFly has met his parents. And because of his interaction with them, he's changed the foundations that led to their eventual marriage and his own birth. So he discovers that in the first clip that we're going to see and then it jumps straight to the second clip where he must ensure that the right foundations are relayed or he is in danger of never having existed.

Well, thank you for indulging my love of Michael J. Fox. Now, why we looked at that is because our present and our future are based on the past. And if we were to change that past, nothing stays the same. For Marty McFly, his parents had to kiss at that dance. Or they never would have gotten married and he and his siblings would never have been born. If my parents had sent me to Kingswood College in Box Hill instead of to MLC, maybe I never would have met people who went to St. Hillary's Q. Maybe I never would have joined a band there and maybe I never would have met my husband, Phil. Maybe if I hadn't eaten all of that chocolate over Easter, I might be able to go to the movies this week instead of go to the gym. Our present and our future are based on the past. And nowhere is this more true than in the case of our present and future life with God. Christians are Christians because of one long weekend that happened about 2,000 years ago. One set of historical events are actually the foundation for everything that we can experience now as Christians and everything that we can hope for in the future. The death and resurrection of Christ are these events. Now, the issue is in our reading today that although we don't have a time machine, it is possible for us to put these foundations in danger by what we believe and by putting those foundations in danger, we put at risk the very things that we have as Christians now and in the future. You see, in Corinth, which was a city in Greece, there was a bunch of Christians who were doing this very thing. The Apostle Paul had ministered there in AD 51 and so maybe, you know, only 20 years or so after Jesus' death on the cross. And a number of these Corinthians had become Christians. And we read at the start of chapter 15, if you've got your Bibles out, that would be fantastic. We read that when Paul proclaimed the gospel to them, the Corinthians received it as the truth. They took their stand on it. They based their life and hope upon it. They knew it was the message of salvation and they longed to hold firmly to this message until the Lord returned or until they died trusting in him. And this message that Paul proclaimed to them was the message of the historical events of Jesus Christ. So that's what Paul reminds them in verses 3 to 5.

So there are two parts to this message. And they're like the two wings of an airplane, if you like. If one falls off, then the whole thing comes crashing down. Firstly, Christ died and the evidence of this was that he was buried. He didn't faint. He didn't trick them into thinking that he was dead. He wasn't swapped with somebody else. He was really dead and he was really buried in a tomb. But secondly, Christ was raised on the third day and evidence of this was that he appeared. In the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we know that he appeared to the apostle Peter, which his name is

Kephas in Aramaic. So that's what Paul's written there. And then to the rest of the 12, or to those that were left, not Judas, to transform their doubt into faith. But Paul records even more appearances.

[6 : 42] So we have a look in verse 6 and 7. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

So Jesus appeared to more than just the famous guys. He appeared to more than 500 ordinary, everyday Christians like you and me. And they were all together at one time, so they couldn't have been hallucinating. And they couldn't have all arranged their stories so that they'd say the same thing and trick everyone. And it wasn't, you know, the famous people. They didn't have a vested interest in making sure what they'd already been saying was right. This was 500 ordinary, everyday Christians who saw the risen Jesus. Plus, some of them are still alive, Paul is saying. So why don't you go and ask them? They'll tell you. So in these verses that we've just looked at, Paul's not only reminding them of the twofold message that they believed when they first became Christians, but he is also showing them the trustworthiness of the message.

So if you've got your Bibles there, please have a look. In verse 3, he uses, he speaks about the gospel as something that has been handed on by word of mouth to him, by eyewitnesses. That's the language that he uses. What I handed on to you as a first importance, what I in turn had received.

This is more trustworthy for them than the evening news, the Jerusalem times. Secondly, he says that everything that happened in the gospel was according to the scriptures. So this is not some new idea like all those Greek philosophers were always coming up with something new. No. This had been testified and planned and shown to be necessary for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, thousands of years.

And people could read that this is exactly what God had planned, the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection completed the hope of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. It completed the hope of Adam and Eve that someone would eventually come and crush the serpent's head. It completed the hope of King David that he would not be left to decay in the grave, but would see the light of life.

[9 : 37] And thirdly, in speaking of the trustworthiness of the message, Paul takes care to remind them that he himself was among those to whom Jesus had appeared. So have a look at verses 8 to 11.

You see, if you read the book of Corinthians as a whole, it seems as though the Christians in Corinth, or at least some of them, had decided that Paul was such an unimpressive character that his gospel might have been unimpressive too.

Especially the basicness of what he was teaching. And it seems that they might have called him names as well.

Maybe even saying that he wasn't born again like he claimed. Instead he was untimely born. That is, he was like a miscarriage.

It was a very, very nasty thing to say. But Paul is saying here, No, you're right. I am like one ripped from the womb.

[11 : 16] Because I persecuted the church. I was there when one of the early Christians, Stephen, was killed by stoning. And I gave my approval to the whole thing.

I'm unfit to be called an apostle. You're right. But, Jesus in his grace still gave me new birth. Even if I was, even if I did have to be ripped from the womb.

He appeared to me on the road to Damascus. Actually, I am one of those eyewitnesses that you can trust.

And because of his grace toward me, there is no way I'm letting go of this mission or this message. And anyway, whether or not you think I'm unimpressive, the message that I gave you was the same one that the other apostles would have told you anyway because it is the accurate historical truth.

He appeared to me and my message is trustworthy. So that's the foundation. That's what made the Corinthians Christians.

[12 : 32] That's the only thing that can make us Christians today. But, in this case, the foundation was in danger.

You see, Corinth was an immoral and very pagan place. There were lots of ideas and spiritualities and philosophies that were impinging upon, were beginning to influence what these new Corinthian Christians believed.

And one of these ideas was about the afterlife. You see, the Greek religious thinkers didn't hold much with the idea of bodily resurrection.

In fact, to them, the idea of resurrection of the body was not only ridiculous, it was offensive. They considered the human body a prison for the immortal soul.

And so, when death came, it released the soul to live and the body became an empty shell and became worm food. Now, that's actually not such a foreign idea to us today, I think.

[13 : 40] And I was reading an article a couple of days ago, which said that despite the fact that 90% of Americans believe in God, only a third of them believe that their physical body will be resurrected today.

And I can imagine you can just, you know, maybe halve those figures for our country. Many people in Australia believe that loved ones who have died live on as spirits in another realm.

Or, if you're lucky, you can pay a medium or go on a TV show and have them speak to you. Or, sometimes we ourselves might find ourselves using the language of someone having passed over or still being with us in spirit.

Now, sometimes we mean the right thing by those words, but sometimes it shows that we actually too, like the Corinthians, are being influenced by the ideas around us.

And it's actually very hard for us in this society, with our worldview to think about someone being bodily resurrected.

[14 : 53] But we'll be able to look at that in the following weeks. But it does seem like the Corinthians had that same problem. But they had another problem too. It seems that, from what we read in the rest of the letter, that they loved their present Christian experience so much that they started to focus on it to the exclusion of the promises of future hope.

In their worship, in their use of spiritual gifts, especially the really cool looking ones like tongues or prophecy, they felt that they'd already received everything that God had promised in full.

In fact, it seems like maybe some of them might have begun to think that they were already resurrected, that this is what they had been looking forward to.

They'd been resurrected spiritually or mystically, and all that had been promised had come in them. So, I guess if you combine the influence of the pagan worldview, which excluded the possibility of human bodily resurrection, and you combine that with the overemphasis on the present fulfillment of Christian promises, it seems as though they'd begun to say, as Paul records in verse 12, that there is no resurrection of the dead at all.

You can have a look in verse 12. Now, if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

[16 : 40] Some of you are saying there is no resurrection of the dead. But Paul goes on to say, don't you realize the effect that this idea will have on your foundations?

If there's no resurrection from the dead, if dead men don't rise, if the only resurrection that can be hoped for is a present spiritual resurrection, then what are these empty grave clothes?

Jesus himself could not have been raised. A wing has fallen off the plane. Marty McFly's parents can't get married. Things on the photograph of the Christian life are starting to disappear.

You see, if Jesus has not been raised, a number of things follow. Firstly, Paul says, the proclamation of the apostles was empty and they themselves are liars.

All of that evidence, all of that proof, all the trustworthiness of the gospel that Paul has just been recounting is nothing. It's just a puff of hot air. Verse 14 says, if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain.

[18 : 03] And that language in vain means empty. It's nothing. It's got no substance. There is no truth in it. Verse 15 says, we are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified of God that he raised Christ whom he did not raise.

If it is true that the dead are not raised. Thirdly, the apostles were not only lying themselves, they were making out God to be a liar.

For it was God who had in the scriptures promised the resurrection of the dead and the raising of the Messiah. So the message of the apostles is fading from their picture of the Christian life.

The apostles themselves and their trustworthiness is fading from the picture of the Christian life. And the trustworthiness of God himself is fading from the picture of the Christian life if indeed the dead are not raised.

But if Paul told them empty words then their faith is based on empty promises too.

[19 : 11] None of what they have is real. You see Jesus' death in itself the one wing I left on the plane is not enough to make them the spiritual people that they wanted to be.

If Jesus did not rise then we have no evidence that God accepted the death of Christ as a ransom for our sins.

We have no evidence that he was more than a man who had to pay the price for his own sin and stay dead. if indeed he is raised then we know that what he said about himself was true that he was the one whom God would send to save God's people from their sins to be a ransom for many and he would rise again.

He said those things in the one breath if the rise again bit didn't work the first bit didn't work either and so the Corinthians are still in their sins separated from God for all eternity and furthermore none of the promises that Jesus said such as the coming of the Holy Spirit the fellowship of the Christian life the transformation by God's power none of that was real and anything that they were experiencing at that time was simply self-deception.

So the message of the apostles is fading from the picture the apostles are fading the trustworthiness of God is fading the promise of forgiveness is fading the offer of new life now and in the future is fading if the dead are not raised.

[21 : 11] And finally then in verse 17 those also who have died in Christ have perished. When the Christians and the apostle uses the phrase fallen asleep for those who are Christians who've died if the dead are not raised then that is just a soft sell that is just a cruel euphemism for what has really happened.

If the dead are not raised if Christ is not raised then anybody who believed in Jesus who died is dead forever and they have no hope for the future and thus Paul says we are to be pitied more than anyone else if we hold these foolish ideas of something more to come and the dead are not raised then gee we are silly in fact we are sad because we've got no hope and nothing to back up our claims our sacrifices all that we give up for Christ.

so you can see what was at risk by the Corinthians letting these ideas in that perhaps the resurrection of the body wasn't real first of all what did it do?

It put in danger their foundation the foundation that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and so in doing that it meant that it had implications for the rest of their Christian life the message the apostles the trustworthiness of God the forgiveness of sins and the hope for new life now and in the future I want to finish by sharing with you a conversation that I had some years ago I guess to encourage you in some ways that all of us can muck up and also to encourage you in the importance of being sure of our foundations and telling people about them I was with a girl let's call her Sarah that I did biomedical science with and one afternoon after class we got a coffee together and I was very excited because it was my opportunity to share my faith with her and I love to do that and so

I was telling her all about how awesome it was to know Jesus personally in my life what a great thing it was and how awesome it was to have a relationship with Jesus and she listened politely and eventually she said what would you do if you found out that it wasn't true what if Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead and in my keenness to show how great it was to be a Christian I said something like well you know I love this life I love my church I love praying I don't think I'd want to live any other way and so I guess I'd still choose to live like this I'd still choose to be a Christian even if there was a possibility that it wasn't true and her face fell and I could tell at that point I'd lost her and you see I later discovered that although she appeared to be a happy intelligent and successful girl oh she was all those things but she was struggling to cope with the death of her father which had happened not more than two years ago she lived a good life she had a nice house she had a kind mum she had great future career prospects hope for this life only meant nothing for her because her dad was gone and she knew that everything that she had all the great things even the great things that I talked about if they didn't continue if something didn't continue beyond the grave then what was the point and if this

[25 : 50] Christian girl drinking coffee with her couldn't defend and lay down the evidence for the historical foundation of what she believed then that hope seemed futile the faith seemed futile what was the point if it was just for this life but if it was based on something that had repercussions for the future then maybe then maybe she would have been interested now of course I continued to share the message with her and invited her to different things but I never forgot that particular day because it said to me that as much as we might enjoy this life being Christians as much as we might enjoy the fellowship that we have together it is nothing if it is not based on the historical events of the death and resurrection of

Christ because everything every part of what we love is just fading away if that is not true and so I guess as I end tonight I just want to encourage you we're going to learn more about the resurrection in the following weeks but I just want to encourage you to make sure to make certain your foundations if you need to read books if you need to come and talk to somebody about the questions that you have about the doubts that you have how does this fit with this is this really right please do that because if we let things nag and undermine the truth of the resurrection all we're going to be left with is just a faded photograph that will eventually crumble into nothing but friends as we will learn in the next three weeks if we have a sure and certain hope of the resurrection of all in the future because of the resurrection of

Christ in the past then then we're not to be pitied no we have more joy more strength more hope than any person let's pray lord our god thank you that you have done everything for us that you sent Jesus to die and lord you confirmed that he is the lord of lords and king of kings that he paid for our sins by raising him from the dead thank you god please write that truth on our hearts and help us to know where we need to shore up our foundations so that we might have a strong and certain hope for the future lead us to the right people to the right passages in scripture reveal to us the truth so that we might stand firm and when all has been done we might stand and we pray it in Jesus name amen so to to stop coming