

RISE
Part 8: “The Resurrection in Real Life”
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:58

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on March 25, 2018

INTRODUCTION

- Some people have done horrible things in the name of Jesus. But even when full allowance has been made for all these horrible things, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the positive impact that Christianity has had on history.
 - Historians have shown that all the things we take for granted in western civilization such as human rights, tolerance, social justice, and racial reconciliation are the direct legacy of the Christian faith.
 - In his book *The Victory of Reason* sociologist Rodney Stark shows how the **“success of the West, including the rise of science, rested entirely on religious foundations and the people who brought it about were devout Christians.”**¹
- For instance, during the first millennium it was Christians who eradicated slavery in barbarian Europe. When slavery reared its ugly head again in the 18th century it was, once again, put down by Christians such as William Wilberforce.
 - It was Christians who ended the Roman practice of infanticide where parents discarded unwanted newborns to die.
 - In the 4th century it was Christians who put an end to the rivers of blood that flowed from the gladiator games.
 - Unlike the Greeks and Romans, Christians were concerned for health care and for looking after the sick and dying. The first hospital was built under St. Basil in 369 A.D.
 - Although women were routinely oppressed in ancient cultures, it was the Christian faith that elevated their status and protected them from abuse.
 - Modern science grew out of the soil of Christian thinking.
 - The great universities of Europe and North America, like Oxford, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, were all founded by Christians for the glory of God.
- So what was it that made these Christians great? I don’t mean “great” in a proud or boastful sense. I mean “great” in the sense that God says to you, “well done, good and faithful servant.” I mean “great” as Jesus defined great, which is using your life to serve him and his cause.
 - I want to know because within every one of us there is a deep desire for our lives to count. We may not change the world but we want to do things that matter.
 - And yet if we are honest we often do not even know where to begin. And even when we do give ourselves to certain projects or causes we quickly get discouraged and even quit when things get difficult. So what is it that made these Christians great?

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, xi.

- In short, they possessed two critical ingredients that any life of greatness requires: First, they possessed *unwavering convictions* and second, they possessed *untiring motivation*.
 - This morning I aim to help us gain these two things. I am praying that out of this message you would devote yourself to projects, causes, and works that will make an impact for the cause of Christ.
 - I praying that young people would be inspired to dream about how to use their lives for Christ. I am praying those who once served Christ well but have started coasting would, once again, pick up speed in serving Christ. I am praying that those who are using their lives for Christ but are deeply discouraged over how hard it is would find new strength to keep going.

UNWAVERING CONVICTIONS

- First then, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) to make a difference in this world we must possess unwavering convictions.**
 - People without convictions never do anything of significance. Every great act is driven by deep conviction.
 - Think of Martin Luther King Jr. It was the unwavering conviction that black people should be considered equal to white people that drove all his efforts. If you want your life to count you must possess unwavering conviction.
- This is exactly what Paul has been seeking to do in this chapter; namely, to give us unwavering conviction in a specific and important area of life. You can see this in the language of verse 58. **READ 58a - *Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable.***
 - These two words, “Steadfast, immovable” mean that as you move forward you don’t fall over. You stand strong and don’t get pushed around. This is the fish that swims against the current of the river. This is the marathon runner that stays on course and keeps putting one foot in front of another. This is the soldier who stands firm under fire and keeps moving forward.
 - Paul is calling the Corinthians, and us, to be unwavering in our convictions.
- But what convictions is he talking about? Paul is calling for us to have unwavering convictions in a specific area. Notice that verse 58 begins with the word, “therefore,” which means, “in light of everything I have just said, be steadfast and immovable.”
 - So if you want to know the specific area he is talking about then you need to read the first 57 verses of the chapter. So what were the last 57 verses about? Answer: having deep conviction about what will happen after death. More specifically, Paul aims for us to have deep conviction that this life is not all there is, that one day Jesus will return and he will raise his people from the dead, give them immortal bodies, destroy death, and bring his people into new world where they will dwell with God forever.
 - Paul does not want us to be confused about what will happen after death. He doesn’t want us having vague and unclear views of the afterlife. He

wants us to have unwavering conviction that God will raise his people from the dead.

- But how can we be so sure? Paul's argument is easy to understand. It is this: Since God raised Jesus from the dead, he can and will raise all those who belong to Christ from the dead.
 - We do not need to spend much more time on this first point because we have spent the last seven weeks developing this unwavering conviction.
- Therefore, and in light of all that we have said in the past seven weeks, I say to you my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast and immovable in your views of death and what comes after it.
 - The Christian need not fear that their sins will condemn them for, like Paul, we shout, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3). The Christian knows there is a future resurrection coming because, like Paul, we believe that God will raise us like he raised Jesus.
 - Therefore, the Christian can mock death like Paul does, "**Where O death is your victory?**" The Christian can ridicule death like Paul does, "**Where O death is your sting?**" How can we be so confident in the face of death? Are we just naïve? Is this just a lot of false bravado?
 - No, the Christian can do this because we have the unwavering conviction that a day is coming when Jesus will return and raise us from the dead just like he raised Jesus from the dead.
- Do you want your life to count? Do you want to do things that matter? It begins by developing unwavering convictions about Christ's death for your sin, about his resurrection, and about your future resurrection when Christ returns.

UNTIRING MOTIVATION

- Now in the second place we need to say that **(SHOW SLIDE 3) to make a difference in this world we must possess untiring motivation.**
 - Once you become a Christian your convictions spur you to work for the cause of Christ. But it doesn't take long before you realize that you need more than just convictions. You need untiring motivation.
 - It is easy to be motivated to serve Jesus for a few years but to do so for decade after decade requires more. So where can we get this untiring motivation? We get it by connecting our convictions about the resurrection of the dead to the nitty-gritty work of serving Jesus.
 - **READ 58 - Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.**
- "The work of the Lord" is anything we do to promote Christ and his kingdom. It is a very broad category and includes the smallest acts of giving a cup of water to someone in need to giving a million dollars to world missions. It includes working to reconcile colleagues in your workplace to telling them about Jesus. It is caring for the poor, the handicapped, and the unborn. It is raising children, teaching Sunday School, taking

someone a meal, or just sitting with someone as they weep. It is any way that we work to see Jesus and his values, his purposes, come to pass.

- And Paul says we are “always” to give ourselves to this work. It is so easy to give a spurt of energy. It is so easy to teach Sunday school for a few weeks. It is easy to volunteer for a few weeks. It is easy to sponsor a child through Compassion for one year. But when the bills pile up, when the novelty wears off, when there is little success, and when the difficulties mount we lose motivation and so often give up.
 - Paul says keep going. Always abound. To abound means to overdue it, to overflow with it, to fill your days with work for Jesus. It means to think, dream, and pray about how you can serve Jesus.
 - But how do you keep abounding year after year, decade after decade, all the way to the end of your days? Where do you get such untiring motivation? Look at Paul’s last phrase. **READ 58b - *always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.***
- Why is our labour not in vain? Because this life is not all there is. Paul talked about this back in verses 30-32. He says that if this life is all there is then all the risks and suffering he has endured for Jesus is a waste of time and he is a fool. The same is true for you. If Jesus did not rise then all the time you have given in service to Jesus is wasted. All the money you have given to his cause is wasted.
 - What is it that kept Paul going? What keeps us serving Jesus when we are discouraged and feeling like it is too hard?
 - From the fact that this life is not all there is. Since God raised Jesus from the dead he can and will raise all those who belong to Christ from the dead.
- Christianity gives tremendous meaning to everything you do. To really grasp this consider the opposite. If you are merely the product of random meaningless chance then there is no ultimate reason for why you exist. You are an accident. You have no ultimate purpose.
 - Not only that but you are going to die. You must come to grips with what Paul Tillich called “***the threat of non-being.***” Though you exist today there will be a day when you will cease to exist. And it is not just you. Scientists tell us that the entire universe is running down into death.
 - If there is no God and no life beyond the grave then humanity will eventually die, the earth will die, and the sun will die. It will be like we never existed at all. If this is the case, then what is the point of working so hard? What is the point of all your achievements?
- The English writer H.G. Wells saw the implications of not believing in God or life beyond the grave. In his novel *The Time Machine* Wells’ time traveler goes far into the future to discover the destiny of man. All he finds is a dead earth, save for a few lichens and moss, orbiting a gigantic red sun.

- The time traveler writes about what it is like to be in this future: **“Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all was over.”**²
 - And so Wells’ time traveler returns to the present. But what does he return to? Only to a purposeless point in time that is rushing to that future oblivion. Everything in us cries out, **“No, it cannot end like that.”** But listen, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then we must come to grips with the fact that every single thing we do is ultimately meaningless.
- Leonard Woolf was the husband of famous author Virginia Woolf. Like his wife, he was an author but also a political theorist, publisher, and civil servant. Listen to what he writes at the end of his life as he considers all the work he did.
 - **“I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past 57 years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played ping pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather [shameful] confession that I must have in a long life ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.”**³
 - You see, if death takes everything then, at the end of the day, everything is ultimately futile. In one of her humorous columns, Erma Bombeck asks, **“What is the greatest enemy of every housewife?”** And she answers, **“Dirt. It’s what makes your life miserable. There’s dirt on the dishes. There’s dirt in the diaper. There’s dirt on the rug. There’s dirt everywhere. You spend all your time fighting against dirt.”** Then she asks, **“And what do you get for all your years of trouble? Six feet of dirt.”**
- Now contrast all of this with the message of Christianity. Christianity says that you are not just a random collection of atoms. God created you and God has prepared good works for you to do (Eph 2:10). Moreover, your life will not end at the grave. God will raise his people from the dead like he raised Jesus.
 - This gives tremendous motivation to work hard in everything you do. Notice that Paul does not end his great chapter on resurrection by saying, **“Therefore, since you have this great hope, sit back and relax because you know God has a great future in store for you.”** No, he calls us to work hard for him and his cause.
 - Since God will raise the dead like he raised Jesus, what we do in this life will last into God’s future. That is why our actions are not in vain. In some way they will last. To cite a famous movie line: **“What we do in life echoes in eternity.”** Far better, let me cite the words of Revelation 14:13: **“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”**

² H.G. Wells, *The Time Traveler*, chapter 11.

³ Cited in Ernest T. Campbell, *Locked in a Room with Open Doors* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1974), 117.

- One author writes this: ***“You are – strange though it may seem...accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.”***⁴
 - I have no idea how that works but that is what Paul is saying. Your work here is not in vain. This gives untiring motivation to our work.
- It is often said that Christians are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good. Yet, this is simply not true. Historically speaking, it was a clear vision of life beyond the grave that propelled Christians to devote their lives to causes such as abolishing slavery, instituting prison reforms, starting higher education, building hospitals, and raising orphans.
 - C.S. Lewis writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) *“If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”***⁵

APPLICATIONS

- Let me speak to three groups of people here today – the young (under 40), the middle aged (40-65), and the retired. Young people, you have your entire life ahead of you. What will you use it for? Oh I plead with you not to dream small. Do you know what a small dream is? It is a small dream to have a job that pays triple figures, to own two houses, to vacation in Hawaii every winter, and to retire on a beach somewhere at 55 years old. That is such a small dream when you consider eternity. Dream big!
 - Dream about how you can influence a whole generation of children, including your own, to grow up to know God. Dream about how you can enter the business world to help create a great society and to help the poor. Dream about how you can take the gospel to an unreached people group. Dream about how you can give hundreds of thousands of dollars to see Bible’s translated, water come to

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, chapter 10, 119.

needy people, and drug addicted people come clean. Dream about how you can care for the handicapped, the unborn, and the least of these.

- Then get the training you need. Go to school. Get a mentor who has accomplished what you want to do. Learn and learn. Ask lots of questions. Dream and then work with all your might for 50 years, knowing that your labour is not in vain.
- Now a word to the middle aged. When you are young you dream and then start working hard. But then you discover that it is far harder than you thought. You can become disillusioned that you haven't seen all your dreams become a reality. You grow weary at how slowly things move and at how difficult it is. You hit your forties and you wonder if you have peaked. And then you suddenly realize that you need to do this for another 20-25 years.
 - It is factors like these that lead to a mid-life crisis when the man buys a motorcycle, leaves his wife, and throws away everything he has built. It is factors like these that cause those in their fifties and early sixties to just coast and say, "I've done my part" despite the fact that they are at their highest earning potential and generally still have their health.
 - The stage from middle age to retirement is a great time to re-evaluate your life and priorities, to refine the dream, and to dream new dreams. You now possess the wealth and experience to truly make a difference. So I plead with you not to coast. Not to quit.
 - Listen to what Paul wrote in his middle age. ***"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."***
- Third, let's think about this passage in light of retirement. Clearly I am no authority on this. I point all of you who are retired to a little book by J.I. Packer entitled, "Finishing our course with joy." Packer is now in his 80's and reflects on the unique challenges and temptations of aging and retirement.
 - I encourage each of you who are retired to talk with each other and simply seek to answer this question: ***"what does retirement look like in light of this verse?"***
- Brothers and sisters, let us make our lives count. This life is so short. Eternity awaits.
 - ***"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."***