

Sermon 54: 1 Corinthians 15:5-8: The Historicity and Significance of the Resurrection

OUTLINE

The reality of the resurrection
The nature of the resurrection

INTRODUCTION

How can we know that Jesus rose from the dead? We have the strongest form of evidence that could be found in the ancient world, we have the eye witness reports of multiple eye witnesses. Last week we looked at the fact that the death, burial and resurrection of Christ was foretold in the OT and came to pass according to the Scriptures. Today our confidence in this gospel is further strengthened as we see that Paul goes on not only to ground the truth of gospel upon the scriptures but demonstrates that the historical events of Christ's death, burial and resurrection were witnessed. Today as we continue looking at 1 Cor. 15:5-8, we see Paul reminding the Corinthians of the historicity of the resurrection. You will remember that the Corinthians were confused about their own future resurrection being influenced by Greek ideas that thought a bodily resurrection was an absurd and undesirable notion. Paul is going to show them that they will be resurrected bodily, but what he does is he goes back to the established fact of Jesus resurrection, because it is because He is raised that we will be raised also.

Some have actually suggested that the best proof for Christianity is the resurrection of Christ, because of the eye witnesses, because of the problem of an empty tomb, because of the radical change in the disciples, some might even want to add the Turin Shroud to the mix, though I don't. The historicity of the resurrection is a compelling proof for the truthfulness of Christianity. It is interesting to me that even of late, through Wes Huff a Canadian apologist, this truth has been getting more air time. He has been interviewed by the likes of Joe Rogan and Pierce Morgan with regards to these things helping many see that the resurrection of Christ is a historically verifiable event.

So today as we move through these verses we want to make two points. Firstly, we want to through the presence of these eye witnesses see the historical reality of the resurrection. Secondly, we want to look at not merely the fact of the resurrection, but the significance of it.

The reality of the resurrection

V5-8, 'and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.' Paul reminds the Corinthians that there are many eye witnesses to the resurrected Christ. Paul does not list all of them but only a sample, here are the other ones we have in a rough chronological order. There are at least 11 recorded accounts of Jesus appearing to people after His resurrection during the 40 days before He ascended into heaven. First, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, John 20:11-18; second He appeared to the other women, Matthew 28:9-10; third He appeared to the disciples on the Emmaus Road Luke 24:13-31; then to Peter by himself Luke

24:34, 1 Cor. 15:5; and then to the ten apostles minus Thomas John 20:19-25. These were all the appearances on that first resurrection Sunday. But there are others one week later Jesus appeared to the 11 apostles including Thomas John 20:24-31; on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where Peter is restored, John 21; Jesus appeared to the 11 on a mountain in Galilee to give the Great Commission, Matt. 28:16-20; Paul reveals that Jesus also appeared to 500 of His disciples at one time, 1 Cor. 15:6; and then also to His own half-brother James, 1 Cor. 15:7, and finally at the Ascension, Luke 24:50-51, Acts 1:4-11. But there are post-Ascension appearances where Jesus appears to the first martyr Stephen while he is being stoned to death; Paul on the Damascus road; even John in the book of Revelation.

Please note that Paul points to real people, known people and multiple people who have seen the Risen Lord. Cephas is the apostle Peter; the twelve are the original 12 apostles minus Judas, they kept the original title of the 12 to distinguish them from other apostles. To more than 500 at one time, and many of these are still alive at the time of Paul's writing about 20 years after the event of the resurrection. It is interesting that Paul makes this point that some of them are still alive. Paul it seems is inviting people to go and ask those witnesses about what they have seen. Paul is betraying that he is not a beknighted and gullible ancient person who is credulous and believes every unbelievable thing. He is aware that it loans credibility if there is more than one witness and that those witnesses can be consulted. Many today falsely think that ancient people were just stupid and believed in fairies and gods and demons and the boogeyman, so of course they would believe in a resurrection. We have the example of doubting Thomas who did not immediately believe. He knew Christ had died and been buried and was not willing to just believe without seeing, and he saw and gave us one of the greatest statements of faith in the Bible where he said to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God.' This is further proven by the fact that Jesus appeared to his own half-brother James. James we know was not a believer in Christ while He was alive. All the evidence that we have of him in the gospels indicates a family member how thinks that Jesus is crazy in need of an intervention; or someone that accuses Jesus of being an upstart who is a fake who is doing all the public ministry stuff for attention. James is singled out for a visit by the resurrected Christ and he is never the same he becomes a convinced believer and leader in the church. Paul then mentions that Jesus appeared 'to all the apostles.' Some get confused because Jesus has already appeared to the 12, but the word 'apostle' was used in a technical sense referring to those with authority and were appointed by Christ Himself, and there is a broad use where because the word literally means 'sent one' the word is applied to commissioned people. These 'apostles' might be the 70 that Jesus sent out during His ministry or another identifiable group. Paul is adding them to make a point, that Jesus appeared to another group in addition to the main leaders. Paul could have added the various women; those on the road to Emmaus; and others but rushes to include himself as an eye witness of the resurrected Lord.

There are many theories that try to discredit the resurrection but the sustained appearances of Christ over a 40 day period, to a multitude of different people in different situations all add up to a verifiable historical event. As far as historical events go, we have as much evidence as could be had for an ancient event. There are those who claim that Mary Magdalene had been hallucinating, however as we view this impressive list of post resurrection appearances we can see that the eye witness accounts do not rest on one person's testimony. Some have tried to say that the sightings can be attributed to mass hallucination, however,

the conditions necessary for hallucination are not met. Habermas has these points against the view that this resulted from Hallucination. 1. hallucinations are private experiences but we see 500 experiencing the same 'hallucination'. 2. Jesus appeared to various types of people, and different group sizes making the hallucination theory impossible. 3. hallucinations spring from hopeful expectations. The disciples showed no such high hopes but rather appeared to have their hopes dashed. 4. hallucinations are not sufficient to account for the radical transformations experienced by the disciples that they were willing to lay down their lives, 5. that cynical James was converted by a resurrection appearance, 6. and Paul, a persecutor of the Church. 7. the hallucination theory also has no accounting of the empty tomb. (Five views on apologetics). We could add as well that hallucinations are not able to eat, be touched, clung to, touched, etc which was the experience of the disciples.

One of the main pieces of evidence is the empty tomb itself. Jesus died was buried, and His body is no longer there. The empty tomb has been seen as a problem by many people, because if it is true it points to the resurrection. So there have been a number of theories propounded. Firstly, that the women went to the wrong tomb because they couldn't see in the dark. However, this theory is immensely weak for the disciples Peter and John also went to the tomb, during the day time and found it empty. And if at any point the Jewish authorities wanted to show that Jesus was in fact still dead they could have merely produced the body from the correct tomb. It never happens. Secondly, there is the theory that the Jews or the Romans stole the body and hid it. Various things militate against this theory. Firstly, the Jews and Romans at no point produced the body later when the apostles began preaching that Jesus was resurrected. Secondly, it would be counterproductive to their various causes to provoke the disciples to falsely believe that Jesus was risen. The Jews were trying to keep the Jewish populace in control as were the Romans. Thirdly, you have the difficulty of the grave robbers stealing the body but taking the time to unwrap it and leave the grave clothes behind. All the while Roman guards are outside. Thirdly, there is the view that the disciples stole the body, either the women or the other disciples. This view is given little attention when you realise what would happen to a Roman guard who left his post, fell asleep, or lost his charge. The death penalty was handed out for neglect in duty, that ensured that the guards were attentive. Their lives depended on it, and we have no account of the guards being strong armed, and no charges brought against the disciples for anything like this. Also if we are going to believe that these disciples deliberately stole the body and lied, we have to go further and postulate that all the apostles were willing to die, and be beaten for that lie; and that all the other 500 witnesses mentioned in 1 Cor 15 were deluded. Fourthly, there is the view that Jesus merely swooned on the cross and revived due to the cool of the tomb, and the smell of the spices when He was buried. That He shook Himself loose from the graveclothes, rolled away the stone, escaped the attention of the guards and was able to make His disciples believe that He had conquered death, being able to suddenly appear in a room, and keep His identity revealed in plain sight. John Stott puts it like this, 'are we to believe that after the rigours and pains of trial, mockery, flogging and crucifixion He could survive thirty-six hours in a stone sepulchre with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That He could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb, and this without disturbing the Roman guard? That then, weak and sickly and hungry. He could appear to His disciples in such a way as to give the impression that He had died and risen, could send them into all the world and promise to be with them unto the end of

time? That He could live somewhere hidden for forty days, making occasional surprise appearances, and then finally disappear without any explanation? Such credulity is more incredible than Thomas' unbelief." (The new evidence that demands a verdict, p259). The Romans who were masters and perfectors of crucifixion, experienced army men who had seen death and been trained to kill, these were the ones who had killed Christ and confirmed His death to Pilate. The fact that Christ's legs did not need to be broken to speed death, that He was stabbed with a spear to confirm His death, and that His body was released upon the word of the officer in charge. We should not doubt that He did in fact die and resurrect. The resurrection gives the best accounting for the empty tomb.

Paul is assuring the Corinthians about the historicity of the resurrection, we too should take that to heart. We are not believing in fairy tales but truth.

The nature of the resurrection

These are glorious truths, that is what distinguishes Christianity from the other religions. Mohammed is dead; Buddha is dead, but Jesus is alive. There are many ways in which the truth of the resurrection impacts our lives, Paul will unpack its significance with regards to our future resurrection in the rest of this chapter. But for now let me highlight what the resurrection means by looking at some of the resurrection appearances that Paul just mentioned. The truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a bare fact but part of God's gracious activity in saving sinners. So consider what we learn about the significance of Christ's resurrection in His appearance to Peter. Luke 24:34 and 1 Cor. 15:5 both indicate that Peter was singled out for an appearance from the resurrected Christ. Now we do not have an eye witness account of that encounter but based on what we see in the gospels we can imagine some of what it was about. The resurrection of Christ is a resurrection for restoring sinners.

We know the story well. Peter was a proud man, and a leader of men. He was rash, often spoke before he thought, whether it is telling Jesus He can't be crucified; or speaking up on the mount of transfiguration to build a tent for Elijah and Moses, or boasting that all the other disciples would abandon Jesus in His hour of need, but he would not. Luke 22:31-34, "'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.'" ³³ Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." ³⁴ Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." Jesus encouraged Peter to pray lest he enter into temptation because the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Peter like the others chose to sleep. When the time came for Jesus arrest, Peter put up a little resistance but fled; and when he tried to be near Jesus while He was being tried, he denied Christ three times in a terrible way. Peter was a man broken over his own sins and he fled weeping. How would he have felt on Sunday morning knowing the way he had failed? But the resurrected Saviour appears to Peter because the resurrection is able to restore fallen sinners. Are you like Peter? You do love Christ but have failed Him, not just once but repeatedly. You weep over what you have done and you are ashamed. You want to be His servant but do not feel worthy. Good news! Jesus restores Peter. Jesus knew of His failing; interceded on His behalf; indicates His willingness to forgive Peter; and even indicates that He is willing to use Peter in His service. Today, don't only think in the abstract about the historical facts of Jesus risen

from the dead, see Him as the one risen to restore sinners and put them into His service.

The resurrection of Christ is also encouragement for the hopeless. I love the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. If ever there were two people who had the rug pulled out from under this, it is them. There they were full of hopes and dreams; Jesus the Messiah had come, their happily ever after was on the horizon, and suddenly it was all taken away from them with the death of Jesus. We always look on as outsiders seeing their ignorance and smiling to ourselves. But so often this is us. We are going along with a wonderful plan for our lives, it all falls apart, but notice that the worst tragedy of human history happened according to God's plan, how much more the lesser tragedies of our lives. And if you compare the happy ending they thought would happen to the happy ending that God will realize through the tragedy of the cross, we can learn how to walk by faith when the carpet is pulled out from underneath us. What we thought was failure was in fact progress; what appears to be defeat is greater victory; the good we thought we lost, we get better by what God accomplishes through the bad. The resurrection of Christ gives hope to hurting and discouraged people.

The resurrection of Christ turns unbelievers and doubters into faith filled followers. We know of three types of unbelievers. Firstly, there is Thomas, one of the 12, a believer but who dared not believe the truth that Jesus was raised from the dead, just as He said He would, and which the Scriptures also bear witness too. The resurrection turned this reticent disciple into a fervent worshipper. But then there is the unbeliever the half-brother of Jesus James. He was not combative but he was disbelieving and mocking of Jesus. Here was one who knew Jesus his whole life, but because of the resurrection he became convinced that his half-brother was more than a mere man but in his later letter one he calls 'Lord' and the one who will return again. And then of course there is Paul himself. Paul was a persecutor of the church, he was personally responsible for Christians being arrested and being put to death. He worked against God who brought the promised Messiah to the Jews. But the Risen Christ saves His enemies. Jesus appeared to the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus and arrested him in his unbelief. This is what we see the resurrected Christ doing. He turns enemies into friends, persecutors into martyrs. And it has been stressed that the radical turn around of a man who denied Christ; of a sceptic who mocked Him; and a persecutor who became His most committed missionary is proof of the reality of Christ risen from the dead. The resurrection is more than about an interesting event in history, it is an event that proves that Jesus is who He said He is the Son of God; the Shepherd that lays down His life for the sheep; the way the truth and the life. It is an event that not only titillates the mind but radically changes sinners lives. Today there are many who are taking about the resurrection of Jesus. But at the end of the day, believing in the historical fact of the resurrection is not enough. The devil believes that Jesus rose from the dead; the Pharisees who conspired to kill Him know it is true as they paid off the Roman guards to keep quiet. Many today can intellectually admit that the resurrection is possible and even true. But this is not what will save you. What will you do with the risen Christ? Will you believe that He is Lord and Saviour? Will you turn from your sins and follow Him? the resurrection is not a side show to interest you, it is also powerful truth that demands a response, Paul when preaching in Athens said, 'The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,'³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man

whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." The resurrection is a day of great hope and promise for the believer, it points to the final victory that we will have over sin, satan and death. But the resurrection is also a future promise of a judgment day when everyone who has ever lived will be raised by the power of God to stand before Him on that day to give an account for their lives. Those who have believed in Christ will rise in glorified bodies and have their lives evaluated for rewards. But those who are not believers, those who did not receive Jesus as Saviour, those who refused the offer of salvation and continued to live in rebellion towards the God who made us and gave His Son for us, that will be a terrifying day.

The resurrection is a fact, a fact of great significance for us as it proves that we have a Saviour who has paid for our sins; that there is a way for us to escape death; this Risen Saviour is a God who restores sinners, restores hope, and turns doubters, mockers and violent persecutors into friends and partners. The resurrection is not only an interesting event but a proof of a future resurrection for all people, those believe in Him will be raised to eternal life; but those who have refused Him will rise for eternal punishment.