

THE END WILL NOT BE THE END**1 Corinthians 15:23-34****(Read 1 Corinthians 15:23-34)**

Intro: I've been reading Nelson Mandela's book LONG WALK TO FREEDOM. It's a thick book recounting a long struggle for the rights and freedom of non-white Africans in their own country of South Africa. South Africa had a system of separation, discrimination, and subjugation of non-whites called Apartheid. Mandela went to jail for his activities as a freedom fighter against apartheid in 1963. He had been a member of the outlawed African National Congress since he was in his 20s and by the time he was arrested for treason he had actually founded and led the arm of the ANC intended to carry out a violent insurgency against the South African government. The crime of treason was punishable by death and he and a number of others were found guilty because they admitted their guilt. Their basic statement was their actions were justified in light of an unjust system. Instead of hanging however, they were sentenced to life at hard labor and sent to Robben Island prison which is 9 miles off the coast of South Africa.

For the next 27 years Mandela and the others served their time at Robben Island and another prison in Cape Town in the latter years. All the while the struggle for freedom went on with Mandela doing much work even while in prison. By the early 1980s the writing was on the wall for the White minority regime in South Africa. They needed to change. So they began negotiating with Mandela. After years of progress, Mandela and his friends and many other political prisoners were released from prison. The laws that had put them there were rescinded and after 27 years, in 1990, they were free men. But even though they were free, apartheid was still the law of the land. The end was not the end. It actually took 4 more years of negotiation and talks and struggle and even violence for apartheid to be abolished and the rights of Black and Colored South Africans to be realized. Real freedom finally arrived in 1994. The domination of a small minority suppressing the majority was over. Mandela became president of South Africa that same year, promising to serve only one term, which he did, leaving office in 1999.

In 1990 the struggle seemed to be over. Many thought Mandela should just quit while he was ahead. But the end was not the end. His freedom was not the freedom of his people. It took four more years for the real prize. It was a similar story for Paul in his presentation to the skeptical Corinthians concerning the resurrection. Too much had been invested to give up on the hope of resurrection. People had died believing Jesus died and risen again having defeated death. But now it seemed they were giving in to despair and falling for old lies that the end was just that, the end. Paul insists that such unbelief is dangerous. They must instead believe the promise and hang in there because with Jesus as the firstfruits, the end is NOT the end. Let's look at it again, going back to the final verse of last week's text and see how . . .

The Resurrection began with Christ

- It began but it was not completed – completion will come when his followers, us included, are resurrected. That means that our earthly end here will not be the end at all – it will be the beginning of eternity. The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes our resurrection not only possible but necessary. Easter happened, but people still die even though they believe in a risen Jesus, BUT, they don't stay dead. Here is what we celebrate at this wonderful time of year – the end is not the end. Jesus died on the cross to finally defeat death and he did that when he rose from the grave.
- Gordon Fee puts it this way: *"In a sense death, the final enemy to be subdued, is already being destroyed through the resurrection of Christ; but Paul's concern here is with the final destruction, which takes place when Christ's own resurrection as firstfruits culminates in the full harvest of the resurrection of those who are his. Death is the final enemy. At its destruction true meaningfulness is given to life itself. As long as people die, God's own sovereign purposes are not yet realized. Hence the necessity of the resurrection—so as to destroy death by robbing it of its store of those who do not belong to it because they belong to Christ!"*
- This is a message of hope Church! This is the fuel of mission. This is worth sharing. The joy of the resurrection should not be kept under wraps. The world needs to know, the end is not the end.
- But, there were doubters – they're the ones Paul is addressing and they persist in asking . . .

What if?

- Paul throws their arguments back to the sceptics. His determination to convince them shows the tremendous weight he gives to his own argument. So he asks, what if there is no resurrection. And from there he launched into a non-theological discussion. He puts it in practical terms.
- The first question he asks is in verse 29 – let me read it again, *Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?* 1 Corinthians 15:29. Let me just say I don't know what Paul means when he refers to people being baptized for the dead here. There are numerous theories but no legitimate Bible scholar can or will say with any certainty what was happening that Paul refers to it. The Mormons, who are a cult and therefore do not in any way have a valid interpretation of scripture, have a practice of being baptized for the dead that is probably based on this passage. But that's as close as we get. There is no other reference to this kind of baptism anywhere in the Bible – so anyone who is worth their salt, in my humble opinion, will not spend time worrying about baptism for the dead. We don't practice it. Period. Paul's main point in using it as an illustration, is to ask, "Why, if you don't believe in the resurrection, do you even waste your time with baptism and even more so, for those who are already dead? Why waste your time?" The very idea shows the resurrection is a motivation. Because we don't know exactly what was going on 2000 years later makes it a bit confusing, but Paul us throwing their practice back at them to show their questioning is weak.
- And then he uses his own life as an example. If the resurrection is a pipedream then why would he, Paul, go through so much to share its message? Listen again, *And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?* 1 Corinthians 15:30-32a. Paul is in Ephesus as he is writing this and here he talks about facing the wild beasts. Was he thrown to the lions? Certainly he had been beaten and left for dead as we see in Acts 14. In 2 Corinthians Paul tells these very same people, *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* 2 Corinthians 11:25. Why would he go to such lengths for a six foot hole at the end of his life? As he pointed out earlier, *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* 1 Corinthians 15:19. In Fee's words, "No Resurrection means he has played the fool with his life; all of his labor has been in vain after all." The point Paul is making is – He has NOT played the fool. All the sacrifices he has made are worth it all. All the hopes and dreams of those who died believing in the resurrection have not been for naught. Jesus arose and so will his followers. The end is not the end!
- So Corinthians doubters and 21st century sceptics know this . . .

THE RESURECTION IS TRUE SO START LIVING LIKE IT!

- Stop living life like the hopeless hedonist Paul quoted

"Let us eat and drink,

For tomorrow we die." 1 Corinthians 15:32b

and start living like the people of hope we are! Sober up and stop sinning. Fee points out that "*Paul's concern is a simple one: They are to adopt the life of behavior that should be expected of those for whom the future is already and not yet.*" And as they await the final destruction of death they are to live as people who not only have a past in Christ but a future as well. He tells them to stop deceiving yourselves. Their present path is delusion when, in truth, their way must be to live the truth that the end is not the end.

- I've been thinking about this a lot lately. Losing friends and loved ones helps one to realize his mortality. In December I officiated three funerals in one week. One was for Janet Shopbell who was just 85 years old but she had suffered a long time with the cruel deterioration of Parkinson's disease. Another was my friend Delbert who was just 78 years old – the age of my older siblings who were his classmates at Messiah College. The other was our dear sister Gail Steigerwalt who was just 68 years young. These losses all brought home the brevity of life and also the hope of the resurrection. But do you know what really makes you think? It's when a 45 year old Jimmy Lang and a 42 year old Nathan Tucker and a 41 year old Jared Zuercher suddenly die of cardiac arrest. That makes me think I could wake up dead any day. Now don't hear what I'm not saying here. I'm not trying to be morbid or strike fear or sadness into you. What I'm saying is this has made realize that, in Rick Warren's words, the death rate for human beings is 100%.

Unless Jesus returns in my lifetime or in yours, we all will die. And so, I've decided to start living like it. I'm a Christ Follower, and I've put my faith in the One who rose from the grave and live like I believe that he will raise me from the grave too.

Conclusion: Gordon Fee finalizes his commentary on this passage with this truth and I'm going to close with it. *"We should be living in this world as those whose confidence in the final vindication of Christ through our own Resurrection determines the present. It is no wonder that the world fails so often to hear our gospel, which must look at times like anything but the Good News it really is—that Christ delivers people from the bondage of sin and guarantees their future with him in a life where neither sin nor death shall have a foothold."* That is our resurrection promise Church! The end is not the end! Let's live like it. Amen.