



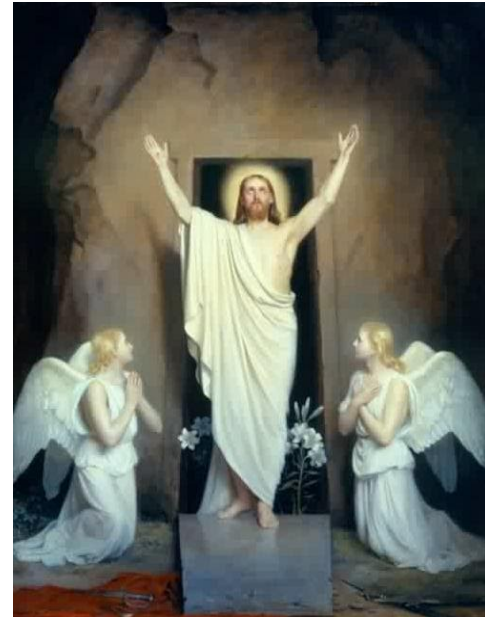
A Life Lived in Vain or Not in Vain

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | April 12, 2020

English Translation for Rev. Jeremiah Cheung

Some people say that John 3:16 is the gospel within the Gospel. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This verse gives us the core of the gospel, but did you know that another passage gives us the most concise presentation of the gospel? **1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”.**¹

These two scripture passages tell us Jesus died for us, was buried for us, and was raised to life for us. He didn’t just die. He wasn’t just buried. He was raised to life! The resurrection is extremely significant. All men will die, all dead people will be buried, but not every dead man will be raised to life. Jesus rising from the dead proves that He is the Son of God.



The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of the gospel. 1 Corinthians chapter 15 says that:

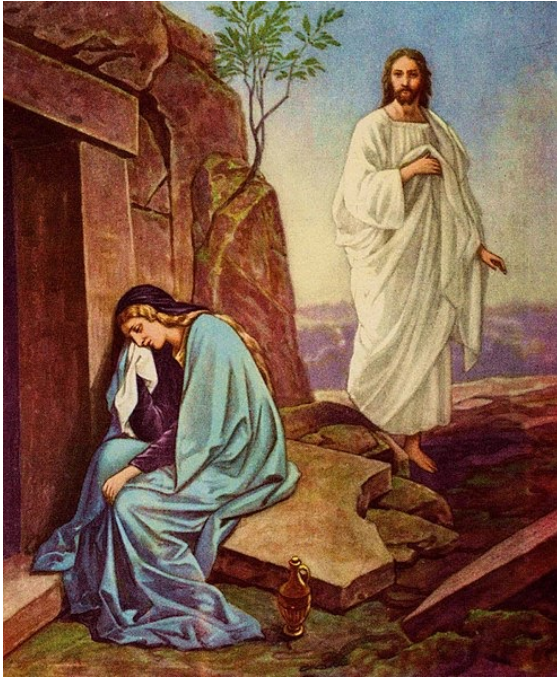
- the resurrection is an important part of the gospel (15:1-11);
- the resurrection is the power behind the preaching of the gospel (15:12-34);
- the resurrection is the future hope and image of believers (15:35-49); and
- the resurrection is necessary to inherit the incorruptible kingdom of God (15:5-58).

In these 58 verses, the phrase “in vain” or “not in vain” appears 6 times:

in v.2: (not) believed in vain; *in v.10:* not without effect; *in v.14:* is useless;
still in v.14: and so is; *in v.17:* futile; and *in v.58:* not in vain.

These are all related to the resurrection. Whether we live our lives in vain or not in vain depends on whether or not we have Christ’s resurrection life in us. **1 Corinthians 15:19 “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”**

¹ The Resurrection of Christ. Painting by Carl Bloch. Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).



There is more to this verse than meets the eye. It can be paraphrased, “If we who are in Christ have hoped only in this life/*have hope only in the future*, then we are, among all people, most miserable and to be pitied.” Resurrection in Christ is our hope today and tomorrow. So whether or not our life will be in vain depends on whether we have the resurrection life of Christ in us. Because if we have Christ’s resurrection life is in us, then our life will not be in vain.

Today, I want us to reflect on verses 1-11. These 11 verses tell us that, if we have Christ’s resurrection life in us, three things will happen in our lives: 1. We will gain a new outlook on life 2. We will experience transformation in life 3. We will demonstrate God’s grace in our life. ²

I. We will gain a new outlook in life

1 Corinthians 15:8-11 is Paul’s outlook on life after he came to believe in the Lord. This is the total opposite of his outlook before he came to know the Lord. From this passage, we can see at least two viewpoints that Paul had of life:

1. “As to one untimely born” (v.8)

What does this sentence mean? The Chinese say that a baby should stay in its mother's womb for ten months, preferably forty weeks. If the baby is born before this period, then it is considered premature. If it is born too early then it will not survive. Especially 2000 years ago, when medicine was not as advanced, premature babies could not survive on their own. After Paul believed in the Lord, he understood that without Christ, he — like a baby born too early — could not have survived at all.

Our lives depend on Him. Before I knew the Lord, I thought I was great and didn’t need God. But now, without the grace of God, I really don’t know how I’d survive.

² Jesus resurrected appears to Mary Magdalene. Image courtesy of [The Bible Revival](https://www.thebiblerevival.com)

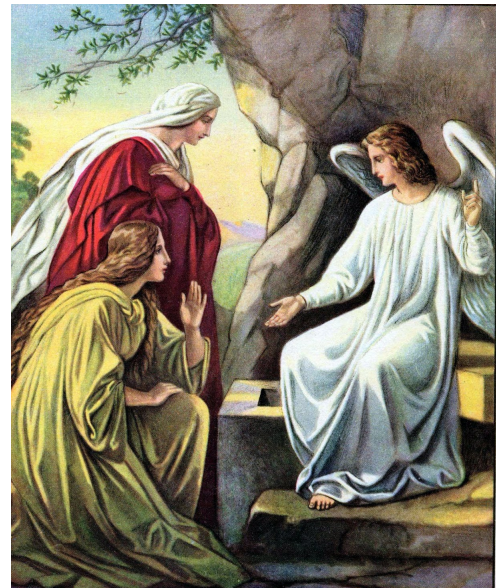


In Psalm 27:13, David said, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

Who was David? He was a king, a warrior, a man of God, a poet. Very few people can achieve the status that David had, yet David said, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." This is what a man of God is like. The first thing that will change when we have Christ's resurrection life in us is a change in our outlook on life. We will realize we cannot live without God.

2. ***"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle" (v.9)***

Paul said that he was the least of the apostles and that he did not even deserve to be called an apostle. Was this true? Isn't it just the opposite? Paul was the greatest of the apostles and was the most deserving to be called an apostle. Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. If we believe that the Book of Hebrews was also written by Paul, then that would be 14 books. How can the man who wrote half of the New Testament be the least of the apostles?



Paul spent 30 years of his life preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Spain. How can he be the least of the apostles when he had planted innumerable churches? None of the apostles had accomplished as much as Paul did. He can be called the apostle of the apostles. Yet he referred to himself as the least and felt he was not worthy to be called an apostle.

Paul shows us the second change that happens when a man gains Christ's resurrection life: he will become humble. This is not false humility. A man who has the life of God in him will acknowledge that he is simply an instrument of God's hand. He realizes he is useless unless the Lord uses his life. We are just like a glove: when we wear a glove, it's as if the glove can do many things. But if we don't put it on, the glove by itself cannot do anything. We are the glove and not the hand!

³ An angel announces the resurrection of Jesus to certain women. Image courtesy of [The Bible Revival](https://www.bible.com)



After Paul came to know the resurrected Lord, after he received the resurrection life, his outlook on life changed. This is the transformation which Christ's resurrection life brings.

Brothers and sisters, have you believed in the Lord? Do you really know the resurrected Lord? If yes, has your outlook in life changed? Can you survive without the Lord? Is there any point in living without the Lord? If you say "Yes, I do not know how to survive without the Lord," if you can't see the purpose of life apart from the Lord, if you *do* know the resurrected Lord, then I congratulate you! You have the true resurrection life in you.

II. We will experience life transformation



Why did Paul's outlook on life change? It is because Paul's life had gone through a metamorphosis. The term metamorphosis describes the process by which a caterpillar turns into a beautiful butterfly. V.10 **"But by the grace of God I am what I am"**. It was God's grace that had turned Paul into the new person he had become.⁴

2 Corinthians 5:17 **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has**

gone, the new is here!" What does this mean? When we come to the Lord, everything is made new. Does that mean all our past mistakes are now gone? Does that mean we will forget it all? No. After David sinned and repented, the Lord forgave him, but did that mean that David could forget his sins? No. But then, being a new creation in Christ means we will see our lives now from a new perspective. In Christ, we are a new being, the Lord no longer counts our sins against us. And neither should we allow guilt to continue to oppress us.

Let's take a look at Micah 7:19. **"You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."** Where are our sins now? They have now been tread underfoot by the Lord and hurled into the depths of the sea.

⁴ Conversion of Paul on the Road to Damascus. Painting by Aelbert Cuyp. Image via [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Just how deep is the sea? If the bottom of the highest mountain in the world were to rest on the depths of sea, it would still be underwater, completely invisible. The depths of the sea are deeper than the mountains are tall!



After meeting the resurrected Lord, Paul gained Christ's resurrection life and his life went through a transformation. **1 Corinthians 4:13** says, "when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment." This is how the world sees us: Christians are to them like the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world. **1 Timothy 1:15** says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst."⁵

This is Paul's own perspective; men see him as garbage, he sees himself as the worst of sinners. **1 Timothy 1:16** says, "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." This is God's perspective. God wants us to become examples.

A few years after I became a believer, I often heard this statement in church, "Do not look at men, if you do, you will only stumble." There is nothing wrong with this statement; we didn't come to church because of men, we come to church because of Christ, so we look at Christ. But, can we avoid looking at our fellow men? This is impossible because we are not blind. The question is: what do you look for?

Philippians 4:8-9 says "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

If we are going to look, let's look for what is good, what is true, what is noble, what is right, what is pure, what is lovely. Church, do not look at bad examples, but good ones. Let me tell you about a few people. They have all gone home to be with the Lord so you need not be jealous of them.

⁵ The Garden Tomb in Jerusalem. Photo by [Phillip Benschmuel](#). Used under CC BY-SA 4.0 license

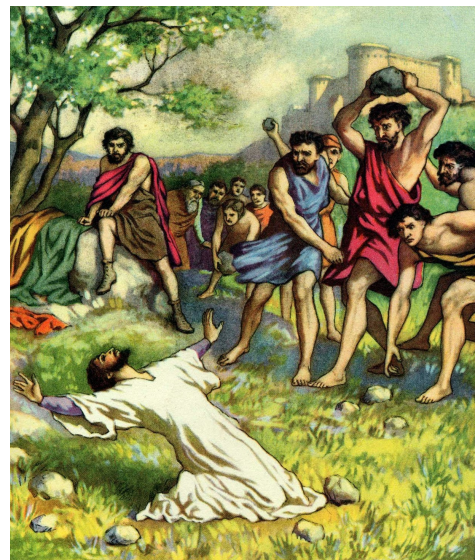


The first is our late Bro. Pedro Tan. I saw generosity in him. He was a very generous man and from him, I learned how to be generous. The second is our late Sis. Giok Suat Ong. I saw how she appreciated others. I have been in the church for many years but I have never heard her say a word of criticism. Yes, once I heard her say, “Aya!” in dismay, but that was all. From her, I learned how to appreciate others. The third is our late Sis. Chun Bi. She used to join the Women’s Fellowship and she passed on when she was 90 years old. From her, I learned how we must carry ourselves in a respectable way. I saw how she was a lady who was respected by all. People showed her much respect. Seeing her, I told myself when I grow old, I must not take advantage of my seniority or capitalize on my age.

When Paul came to know the resurrected Lord – when he had resurrection life in him – not only did his outlook in life change, but his quality of life also changed. He became a model of one who has eternal life. Brothers and sisters, have you truly become a Christian? Do you really know the resurrected Lord? Has the quality of your life changed? A greedy person becomes generous, an ill-tempered person becomes gentle-mannered, while a selfish person will now be caring of others. We are not perfect and we cannot become perfect but, because of the resurrected Lord, we can change and we can continue to change. Have you experienced changes in your life?

III. We will demonstrate God’s grace in our lives

Because of the resurrected Christ in him, Paul’s life underwent a significant transformation. In the past he was called Saul. He was a dreadful man “**because I persecuted the church of God**” (v9). If you study the Book of Acts, you will discover that Paul went into believers’ homes and dragged them to jail, whether men or women. The Jews usually won’t do that, they wouldn’t hurt women, but Paul persecuted the women, too. He had truly been a frightening man. Everyone was afraid of him and after he repented, no one wanted to believe him. No one received him except for one man, Barnabas the Encourager.⁶



When the resurrection life came to Paul, he was a completely changed man. His life exuded grace. He demonstrated grace to all those around him.

⁶ Saul persecuting Christians. Image courtesy of [The Bible Revival](https://www.bible.com)

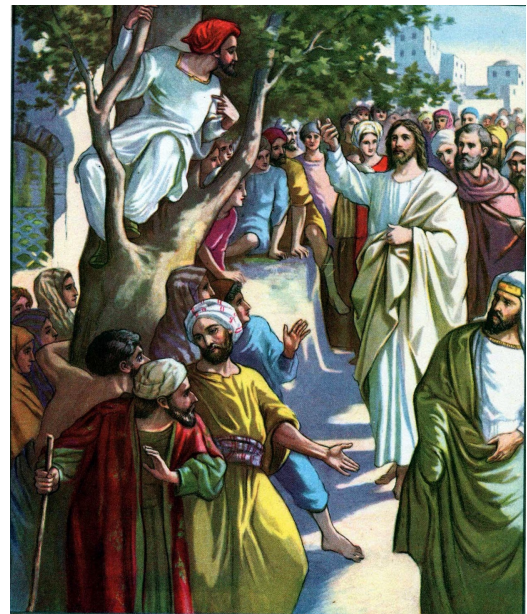


V.10 “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Three times the word “grace” is used in this verse. Paul said it is by the grace of God that he has become who he is. He also said the grace that God has given him was not given in vain, because he has suffered more than the other apostles. This is called repaying grace. Paul again said that he was able to work hard because of the grace of God with him. This is what we call grace upon grace. Church, when a man has the resurrection life of Christ in him, his life will demonstrate the grace of God.

When the Lord Jesus sent his disciples out to preach, He added something worth noting, **“Freely you have received; freely give.”** What does this mean? This is what we call grace.

What did Jesus mean by ‘freely give’? It means to give grace to others. Only what has been freely received can be freely given away. There are some people in this world who never help others. Why? Because they feel that everything they have come from their own labor. They believe they earned it through their own hard work, so they can’t imagine giving nor sharing what they have to others. But a Christian who has received grace, a Christian who has the resurrection life in him will definitely be a generous person. This is because Christ’s life is a life of generosity. He became poor for us so that we may become rich. He became weak for us so that we may become strong.⁷

There is a man in the Bible named Zaccheus whose life is the best proof of a changed life. Zaccheus was a tax collector in Jericho. He was known for his greed. He used his position to cheat people of a lot of money. Money was his life. One day, he met the Lord Jesus who changed his life. When Jesus went to stay at his house, others grumbled saying Jesus has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. Upon hearing this, Zaccheus was concerned that Jesus would no longer proceed to his house, so in front of everyone, he said, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.”



⁷ Jesus in the home of Zaccheus. Image courtesy of [The Bible Revival](https://www.thebiblerevival.com/)



The Law requires that if someone had defrauded another, he must repay the amount and add twenty percent. But Zaccheus said he will give back 400 percent. The Law doesn't even require paying back 50%, why was Zaccheus that extravagant? He used to be a lover of money, now he sees money as dirt, why? It is because Christ's life is now in him; he overflowed with this life of grace.

Church, since you became a believer of the Lord, how many people have you blessed? Are you a channel of grace? I used to love money and it was difficult for me to give money; but I started to become more generous. I don't know when it began but I found myself becoming generous.

Let me share a few stories, but please do not misunderstand me, I just want to let you know that this was not my nature. When I first came to the Philippines, I dedicated the whole of my first month's salary to the Lord because it was my first-fruit; yet this had not been my nature. One time, I visited a family whose father had just passed away due to an accident. I saw that the family was very poor. After I prayed for them, I gave them all the money in my wallet, but this was not my nature. Once a coworker was experiencing huge problems at home, I gave him 20,000 pesos (this was 30 years ago). A sister in Christ in Hong Kong planned to get married but was struggling financially, I sent her a sum of money and she has remained a good friend of mine to this day. That was not my nature. I have also mentioned before that a classmate of my daughter didn't have the money to pay her tuition, I immediately told my daughter we will support her. My daughter also shared the gospel to her. She not only graduated but she came to know the Lord. She is from Hong Kong and when she returned to Hong Kong, she found a church and now actively serves the Lord there. This year she is getting married here in the Philippines; she has asked me to officiate her wedding. Church, please be aware that none of these are things that happened out of my nature. If it were up to my own nature, I would not have done any of these at all. These all come from the life of Christ and the power of His resurrection. It is all because of the grace of God.

Whether we live our lives in vain or not depends on whether we have the resurrection life of Christ in us. And when we have the resurrection life, three things happen. First, we have a new outlook in life. This is who I was before. Now, the old me is no longer bound by sin. I do not judge myself; neither do I care if others judge me, because it is the Lord who will judge me. Second, we will experience life transformation. This is who I am today. I am not perfect, but I am making progress. Third, our lives will demonstrate grace. This is who I will be tomorrow. I want grace to exude from me and I want to become a channel of blessing for all.

Are you living your life in vain or not in vain?