

## Truth or Scam? 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Today we're going to look at one of the best ways to have confidence that what we believe is real. I think it's important to have these things, because we all go through times of doubt when we wonder, "Is God real? Is Christianity real? Or am I just believing a lie?"

I used to coach long jump for the Amery track team, so I was very familiar with how far high school kids could jump and what it would take to win a varsity meet. A boy could usually win if he could jump over 19 feet, and he could probably make it to state if he could go over 20. So in all my years of coaching, I saw only a few boys that could reach those distances.

Well, this past year Caleb decided to go out for middle school track as an eighth grader and he wanted to try long jump. Unfortunately, one week into practice he had close contact with someone who had COVID, so he had to quarantine. And then Amy and I got it, so he ended up missing half of the season. By the time he got back they only had two meets left. But he still wanted to jump, so I took him to the pit and showed him some of the basics and he was jumping over 17' in practice, which was great for a middle schooler, especially with so little practice. I thought he might even be able to win a meet if he could jump that far.

Well the first meet came and I couldn't be there, but all of a sudden I get this text from Amy: "He just jumped 19'11". So I called her right away to tell her, "*No he didn't. Maybe 17'11" but not 19'11". That's impossible for a middle schooler, they must have measured wrong.*" But she insisted. One of the coaches was right there and questioned the distance like I did, so he went over to check, and sure enough, he had jumped 19'11." He even had another jump where he scratched, but they measured it anyways and that one was also over 19 feet.

I couldn't believe it. It was so hard to believe that I thought it had to be a fluke and couldn't happen again. But Caleb thought differently and was hoping to break 20' in his last meet. I was glad for his youthful enthusiasm, but with my coaching experience I just knew it wasn't possible and he'd be in for a big disappointment. So I tried to remind him how good his jumps were and how hard it would be to even get to 19' again.

Well the meet came and people started jumping, and the farthest jumps were around 16', which was pretty normal for middle school. And then Caleb had his first jump. He landed way farther than anyone else, but he scratched. The same thing happened on his second jump. So he only had one jump left. He backed up and took off the third time and this time his toe was just right, so they measured it. "20 feet, 9 inches."

I couldn't believe it! He broke the middle school record by over 3'. He even jumped farther than any of the high school boys from Amery at that time – one who was ranked in state. Everything I knew about long jump made me doubt that Caleb could jump that far, but when I saw it with my own eyes I knew it was true.

I think we all go through times in life where we have serious doubts, especially doubts about God. We might pray and it seems like nothing happens. We ask for healing, and it doesn't happen, or for protection or success or the removal of temptation. We look for God to show up in a certain way and when he doesn't, it doesn't make sense. We begin to doubt. We look around and see the mess the world's in. We see the problems with Christians and churches. We see that most people don't believe what we believe, how do we know we're right and they're wrong? We can't see, hear, or touch God, so how do we know he's real? How do we know Christianity is real and not just some big scam?

I think those questions are normal, and I bet most of us have them from time to time. And the answer isn't to just push forward with a blind faith, trying to believe the unbelievable. That's not the way God does things. If there's no evidence that Christianity is real, I wouldn't believe, and I don't think you should either. But God has given us evidence. There are things to turn to, things to see that our faith is real, he is real, and Christ is real. And today we're going to look at one of those.

We're going back to 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul is confronting some false teaching in Corinth. Some people were beginning to say that there was no resurrection of the dead for various reasons, which was one of the core teachings of Christianity. Paul could see huge problems with that, so he addressed it in this chapter, especially the verses we're looking at today. He shows us how important the resurrection is to the validity of everything we believe.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.

*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. <sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

So you can see Paul's line of reasoning. He starts by pointing out that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ hasn't been raised, everything in Christianity falls apart. The apostles' teaching, which is basically our New Testament, would be a big lie. They'd be guilty of misrepresenting God because they were telling people that he raised Christ from the dead. Their preaching would be worthless and no one should listen.

Furthermore, everyone's faith would be worthless because they were believing a lie. If Christ didn't rise from the dead, our faith would do us no good because we'd still be in our sin – guilty and condemned – and those who died in Christ would have all perished. If Christ was still in the grave it would mean that his death on the cross wasn't good enough to pay the penalty for our sin. It wasn't enough to appease God's wrath. The resurrection is a clear declaration that sin was fully paid for, but if it didn't happen, we're still stuck with sin on our heads. So if you throw out the resurrection, you end up with a Savior who failed and lied.

Paul makes one more striking comment in the last verse: *"If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."* It might be hard for us to understand why he would say that, because we have it really good compared to most Christians. For Paul and most Christians, life has a lot of pain, loss and suffering because of enemies of Christ and the gospel. One of the reasons I like to have Dave Tunell from News Service 2000 come and preach here is to remind us of that.

Paul writes a little later, in verses 30-32: *"Why are we in danger every hour? <sup>31</sup> I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! <sup>32</sup> What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?"*

*If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'*" He's basically saying that suffering for Christ is pointless if there's no resurrection. It would be far better to just eat, drink, and be merry. "Live it up because when you die it's all over." If there's no resurrection, Christians who go through suffering for the sake of Christ, should be pitied more than anyone.

So Paul's point in this passage is clear. If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised and if that's true, Christianity is a big scam that has ruined countless lives including yours and mine.

Now, we don't deny the resurrection like some of them were doing, but we do have times when God doesn't make sense and we doubt and question and wonder if what we believe is really true. We're basically asking ourselves, "Is Christianity a scam? How do we know it's true?" What answer are you going to give yourself in those times?

Paul has given us a way to answer our doubts and test the validity of what we believe. And it all depends on the resurrection of Christ. If Christ didn't rise from the dead, Christianity is a scam. It's a worthless lie. That's what Paul has shown us in these verses. Even if a man named Jesus existed who did miracles and died on the cross, if he didn't rise from the dead, he's a fake and we've been deceived.

But if he did rise from the dead, then the opposite is true. It would prove that God is real, the Bible is true, and Jesus was who he said he was. It would prove that Christianity is the truth. So we're not facing our doubts with blind faith in religious beliefs, we're considering claims of a historical event. Did it happen or not? How can we know?

Let me ask you a question: Did Caleb jump 20'9"? When I heard he jumped 19'11" I didn't believe it was true. I thought somebody made a mistake. I thought it was impossible based on what I knew. But then I heard testimony from people who were actually there – and one of them was a fellow track coach who knew all about jumping and had the same doubts I did but was then able to confirm it. When I heard the eyewitness accounts, I believed it was true.

One week later, I saw Caleb jump 20'9" with my very own eyes, and I've just told you what I saw. I'm not a novice when it comes to long jump. I've coached it for many years, and I can verify that it actually happened. And I wasn't the only one

who saw it. About 50 other people were standing there and can testify to it. It's printed in the meet results and Amery Middle School record book. It happened. Do you believe it?

What if the same thing happened 2,000 years ago? And what if there weren't 50 eyewitnesses, but roughly 620? What if several of them put together written statements about the jump and sent copies to all the surrounding cities to let people know that it happened? And what if thousands more copies were made and carefully preserved so that we could compare them for accuracy today? Would you still believe that jump happened?

That's what we have when it comes to Christ's resurrection. Paul pointed out at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15 that there were about 620 eyewitnesses including himself. Several of them wrote about it and thousands of copies were made, preserved, and interpreted into what we now have in the New Testament. It's one of the most well documented events in ancient history.

If that isn't enough, we can also see the validity of the resurrection through what happened to those eyewitnesses. There's a reason Christianity exists and that we're sitting in church today, and it all stems back to Jesus' disciples and what they did after he died. When Jesus died, their hopes and dreams were crushed. They had more doubts than any of us have ever had. They just devoted three years of their lives to someone they believed was the Messiah and now he was dead. It was over. And their city leaders were relieved because Jesus was causing a lot of trouble for them. But he was dead, and his disciples were in hiding and would soon fade into history like every other pitiful uprising.

But then something changed drastically. A few weeks after Jesus died, his disciples started preaching again with great boldness and did exactly the same things they had done when he was alive and a whole bunch of people were beginning to join them. So now the city leaders had to try to shut it down again. And it would have been very easy to do so at that time. All they had to do was produce a body. If anyone found Jesus' body, even if it was the disciples, it would be over. It would prove that Jesus was a fake. But they never found a body.

So then they had to try to shut the Christians down by threatening them, arresting them, and beating them, because no one in their right mind would carry on a scam under those conditions. But it didn't work. The disciples kept

preaching, even to the point of torture and death. This is what happened to the men we get our beliefs from:

- Matthew was run through with a spear.
- Mark was burned alive.
- They don't know how Luke or John died, but John was sent into exile.
- Paul was beheaded.
- James was pushed off the pinnacle of the temple and then stoned to death.
- Peter was crucified upside down.

And those are the guys who wrote the New Testament. They teach us what to believe. And of the other disciples, Andrew, Philip, Thaddeus, Bartholomew and Simon were all crucified. The other James was beheaded, and Thomas was shot with an arrow. Almost every one of Jesus' disciples faced terrible suffering and death for preaching the things that we believe.

Would they do that if it was a scam? Maybe one or two of them could have been insane and kept it up while nails and fire and spears and arrows were piercing their bodies, but not all of them. They didn't suffer and die to keep a scam alive, they suffered and died because they saw Jesus alive and spent about 40 days with him. They did what they did because they were preparing for his return, and they knew that one day they too would rise from the dead. They're the reason Christianity exists and why we're here today.

Sometimes things don't make sense in our lives, and sometimes God doesn't make sense. Sometimes we have serious doubts and questions. That's pretty normal. God does things that we don't understand. He's God and we are not. He sees and knows things we don't know. And there are times when we have to trust him when life doesn't make sense. But we don't trust with a blind faith. We trust with a faith that rests on the historical reality of Jesus and his resurrection. So when you feel the doubts arise, remember the resurrection. Jesus said it would happen, and it did. History proves that Jesus is alive and our faith is real.