

Of First Importance

We are going to be spending the next month studying the fifteenth chapter in 1 Corinthians. It is the most detailed teaching in the New Testament on the meaning of the Resurrection. I want to begin by briefly underscoring that Paul is speaking here about the Resurrection of Jesus as an event that happened in space and time. We need to affirm this because for two thousand years there have been the skeptics, at times ordained skeptics, who have argued that there was no bodily resurrection of Jesus. What the Disciples experienced was either a hallucination or a metaphysical experience that had nothing to do with the physical body of Jesus. But such suggestions contradict every New Testament passage that describes the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This morning we begin by affirming that the Resurrection of Jesus really happened. If you would like more detailed arguments that support the physical resurrection of Jesus there is a book you can pick up at the entranceway called “The Case for Easter.”

Our focus this morning will be on the first four verses of 1 Corinthians 15. What Paul writes here only makes sense, if with him, we believe that the Resurrection really happened. So please look in your bulletins at verses 1-4 of 1 Corinthians 15.

“Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”

Paul sets forth in very simple language the heart of the Christian faith. There are two simple and obvious divisions. He talks about what the gospel does, and what the gospel is. Paul takes it in that order, but we are going to change it. We are going to look first at what the gospel is and then we will consider what the Gospel does.

At verse three Paul says, “I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn received”. Paul begins by underlining what is most important or we could say that which is fundamental to our understanding of the Gospel.

It is something which he received from Jesus Christ and he is now passing this on to the Corinthians. The fundamental element of the Gospel contains three parts. Christ died for our sins, was buried and he was raised on the third day.

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures is the first element. The good news (the meaning of the word Gospel) is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. Jesus’ death accomplished something for us. It changed us, it delivered us, it set us free. That death had great significance in the mind and heart and eyes of God, and that is the good news. As Peter puts it in his words, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,” 1 Pet 2:24 RSV. Or, to use the words of Isaiah, “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed,” Isa 53:5 KJV.

As we contemplate the cross, and the dying of Jesus in our place, we see that the good news of it is that God takes it seriously, and he is prepared to treat us in an entirely different way than we deserve to be treated on the basis of the death of Jesus on our behalf. There on the cross, we are told, he dealt with our failures, he dealt with our rebellion, he dealt with our sinful, guilty lives. He did something about it so that a besmirched, dark and stained past does not any longer need trouble us. It has been set aside by the death of Jesus, and with that fact we enter into hope and freedom.

Of course, without that fact, life is really hopeless. This philosophy that many people have that God is a judge weighing up the good and the evil of life -- and if the good outweighs the evil you get in and if it does not you have to go to hell -- is not only unbiblical but it is illogical. How could a God of holiness and justice and purity ever accept any kind of evil at all? His demands are for perfection and never anything less. He himself is perfect, and he says to us over and over again, “Be perfect for I am perfect.” What are we going to do with a guilty past in the light of that? The answer, of course, is the good news. In the cross of Jesus, God has already dealt with that sinful past. He offers to us freely the forgiveness of sins.

The second element of the gospel, according to Paul, is that Jesus not only “died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” -- predicted, anticipated and fulfilled in the cross -- but he was also “buried.” Why does Paul include the burial of Jesus? Is it not enough that Jesus died and rose again? Would that not be good news enough? Well, surely the reason for it is that when his disciples came and took the body of Jesus

down from the cross, it marked their acceptance of the fact of his death. The New Testament witness never leaves a doubt in the reader's mind that the disciples ever questioned the fact Jesus was dead. They could never have entertained any idea that he had merely fainted on the cross, or entered into a coma, for they themselves had performed the burial service. That is why Paul adds that here.

The third element is, "that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." Once again he fulfilled the predictions. It was anticipated that he would die; it was equally anticipated that he would rise again from the dead. He said as much to the disciples when in Mark nine we read "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." On the third day, to the amazement of the disciples, he fulfilled all predictions. He was not merely resuscitated (that is, coming back to the life he had before), he was resurrected. That means he came back to a life he had never lived before, a real life, a glorified life, a different life, and yet in the amazing mystery of the resurrection, the same Jesus, with the wounds in his body that they could touch and feel and see for themselves.

Paul says that we are to hold firmly to this Gospel. We are never to let it go. But he warns at the end of verse two that it is possible for us to believe in vain.

Paul is warning us that our faith in Christ can be of such a superficial nature that we accept all the words of the gospel, but we do not let it change anything in us.

It is easy to give the appearance of being a Christian without really being one. The Gospel that we hold firm to is a Gospel that transforms us so that we become more like the Jesus we read about in the four Gospels. This is something that can happen in your life more deeply when you understand what the Gospel does for you.

Paul says there are two things it does for you and me.

First, it makes you stand. Notice he says at the end of verse 1 "the gospel, which you received, in which also you stand." This means you have a foundation; you have a place to handle life; you have a security to which you can resort at any time of pressure and problem and you can stand steady, no matter what kind of force comes against you. When you believe that God has forgiven your sins for Christ's sake, when you believe that God loves you and has accepted you as his child, when you believe that he is working in you by the power of his resurrected life to enable you to love and

to live as you ought and to give you power to say “No” when you need to say “No,” you have a place to stand. That is what Paul said these Corinthians had. They were loved by God, therefore they had a place security.

When you fail and slide away and slip, the gospel is the place where you find recovery and an ability to come back again, sick of soul and hungry of heart, and find relief and forgiveness and healing for your hurting heart. That is the gospel -- the fact that God loves you despite all your failure and all your weakness. He is always ready to pick you up again and wash the hurt away, to start you out anew and teach you to walk in his strength and by his grace. That is a place to stand.

Paul goes on to say that the gospel is doing a second thing -- “by which you are being saved.” Now notice he puts it in the present tense. It is not by which you “were” saved. That is past tense; or by which you “will be” saved, that is future. It is by which you are now “being” saved. The present tense indicates that he is thinking here about our present, earthly experience of life.

By placing it in the present tense Paul is talking about how you are living from day to day. He says that is “being” saved according to how much you are resting on God at work in you, and allowing yourself to be the instrument of his grace. In these terms, what he is talking about is buying you back from wasting your life. In these terms, he is telling us that as we walk with Jesus what we do becomes eternally profitable, not only profitable for this present time, but eternally so, so that you can use your money for eternal profit, you can use your time for eternal profit, you can lay up treasures in heaven and not upon earth. By the way you use your moments and your days, whether you employ them in the strength of God or from the energy of the flesh, you can determine what is going to be good and bad at the judgment seat of Christ, when “every one may receive the things done in his body, whether it be good or bad,” {cf, 2 Cor 5:10}.

Now that is what the gospel is for.

The gospel is to give us stability, to give us steadiness, to give us an immovable foundation, to give us a place of recovery, to give us a place of healing and of wholeness, and finally to redeem our present existence so that it has eternal meaning as we live day by day. What a tremendous theme that is! What a marvelous thing that God has prepared for us, in this solid place to stand!

Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture. He was buried. He rose again from the dead according to the Scripture, that we too might learn to die to our sins, to bury them, and to rise again to the freshness and newness of life that we experience right now by faith in Jesus Christ.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the marvel, the wonder of the gospel. Help us to understand that this is to be the center of our life, the most basic thing about us is our faith in this good news. Nothing can be more foundational than that. Grant to us Lord, to take it seriously, to know that this is the beginning of a new life as we stand again and again at the place where the gospel brings us. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.