THE GOSPEL OF THE RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Key Verses: 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…”

In chapter 15 Paul addresses another problem in the Corinthian church. Some were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead (12). Paul responds to this in three parts. First, in verses 1–11 he revisits the good news of the gospel: Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. Second, in verses 12–34 he shows that it doesn’t make sense to deny the resurrection of the dead yet say we believe in Christ’s resurrection. Third, in verses 35–58 he addresses their question that seems to make the whole idea of a resurrection body sound absurd: “How are the dead raised?” (35) To Greeks it was repulsive that the physical human body that decomposes could actually be raised from the dead. They thought the body doesn’t matter (cf. 6:13–14), that spirituality means someday being released from the body’s frailties and desires. So Paul explains that the resurrection of the body is God’s plan and promise for us in Jesus. It’s not just abstract doctrine. Resurrection faith is practical and applies to our everyday lives here and now. It helps us come back to our senses and not get swept away with living for pleasure (32b–34). It helps us stand firm and give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (58). Most of all it gives us hope. Because of Christ’s resurrection, one day God will swallow up death forever (54; Isa25:8) and give us our very own glorious resurrection body. As we study this first part of 1 Corinthians 15, we especially want to be reminded of the gospel and hold firmly to it. Through this study may God help us to newly believe and share the gospel.

Paul starts by pointing out that the Corinthians had believed the gospel (1–2,11). Many of those Corinthians had had humble beginnings (1:26). In fact, many had lived very corrupt lives (6:9–11a). But when Paul shared the gospel with them, they “received” it. They repented and believed the good news (Mk1:15). Then they were washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God (6:11b). Receiving the gospel wasn’t agreeing to dry, abstract ideas; it was a living, transformative experience. They also took a courageous public stance on the gospel, despite social ridicule, along with all the other Christians around the world. Paul tells them in verses 1–2 that their past, present and future are based on this gospel. In verse 2 he writes, “By this gospel you are saved.” Literally the verb means “you *are being* saved.” Getting saved didn’t just happen long ago. In the present they are actually still being saved by the gospel. And in the future, only this gospel will save them.

At the beginning of verse 3 Paul says that he himself “received” the gospel. He didn’t invent it; the gospel was spreading among people before he became a Christian. He needed it and received it just like anyone else. But he guarded what he received like a treasure (1Ti6:20; 2Ti1:14). He also passed it “on as of first importance.” There are many teachings for Christian living, but the gospel is at the heart and soul of it all. Passing it on as of first importance tells us that Paul had a strong sense of responsibility to share the gospel with others (9:16). No matter who he was with, he was not ashamed of sharing the gospel (Ro1:16).

At the end of verse 2 he warns that if they no longer hold firmly to the gospel, then they “have believed in vain.” It’s easy to be deceived and led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2Co11:3). In every generation people twist and distort the gospel (Gal1:6–7). The devil, our sinful nature and the world all constantly strive to make us lose our grip on the gospel. So Paul says, “…if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.” To “hold firmly” to the gospel means to “hold fast” to it, to “own” it or to “keep it in memory and practice.” We all need to retain the gospel, so we need to be reminded of it often. The gospel isn’t just for non-believers. Even if we know it already and have been firmly established in its truth, we always need to be reminded of the gospel (2Pe1:12–13). In verse 1, “remind” can also mean “make it clear,” clearly known and understood. The gospel needs to be made very clear to us. So what is it?

Paul defines what the gospel is in verses 3–4. Let’s read them. This was a creed of the early Christian church, passed on from person to person, house to house, community to community. It defined what it means to be a Christian, and it still does. The gospel isn’t a philosophical set of ideas. It’s about a person and the historical facts about him. It’s about Jesus. Specifically, it’s to believe that Jesus died for my sins, was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day. Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection from the dead are the two main pillars of Christianity. Paul says that both these events happened “according to the Scriptures,” meaning they fulfilled all the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament (cf. Lk24:45–47). This shows that the gospel didn’t originate in the clever ideas of some human being, but with God himself. God promised the gospel beforehand and fulfilled it exactly as he had promised (Ro1:2; Gal1:11). So the gospel is timeless, believable and reliable. It’s really worth holding to firmly. The word “gospel” means “good news,” and the good news is that Jesus died and rose again. So why are Jesus’ death and resurrection such good news?

To grasp it, we need to know how God made us. Originally, God made us human beings to be great. He made us in his own image, and with a glorious mission to be stewards of the whole world (Ge1:27–28). He showered his love and blessings on us and gave us the freedom to choose to love and serve him. In doing these things God had great expectations for us. But we sinned. The first sin started out small, but it spread like a contagious disease until the whole race was badly infected. Romans 3:23 says, “…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…” In light of this verse, sin breaks our relationship with God and makes us too light to measure up to God’s standards. Made in his image, we should be full of humility, justice, mercy and faithfulness like he is, but we’re proud, selfish and unfaithful. We should be deeply concerned for all his world, but we’re only interested in our own self-preservation. Sin makes our mentality and desires ugly and petty. In fact, sin makes us spiritually sick. Sin makes us rebellious for no reason. Sin makes us full of wounds and sores from the soles of our feet to the tops of our heads (Isa1:4–6). These wounds don’t come from others; they’re self-inflicted whenever we commit sin. Like leprosy, sin makes us numb to our condition. When we’re sick with sin, we don’t even realize what’s wrong with us, but we live with this gnawing sense of fear and guilt in our souls. For many, much of the good they try to do is really motivated by fear and guilt.

So often sin is portrayed as free and enjoyable, like wild orgies, binge drinking, heavy drug abuse, shopping on a credit card or pigging out on junk food. But sin isn’t free and enjoyable. Like those activities, sin violates the basic laws of nature in life and in our bodies. When we sin, it has too high a cost. Romans 6:23a says, “For the wages of sin is death…” In light of God’s holiness, even one small sin demands the death penalty. God had been trying to teach his people the high cost of sin for centuries. Whenever they committed a sin, they had to bring an innocent animal, kill it, and offer it to him. In line with God’s holy justice, sin demanded that a life be sacrificed and blood be shed. It wasn’t because God needed animal sacrifice, but to educate his people on the high cost of sin. Thankfully we don’t have to sacrifice animals anymore. But one of the biggest problems today is that people are so unaware of what sin is, and don’t realize it’s deadly nature. People can “clean up their act,” get financially responsible, eat healthy and exercise to try to undo years of bad behavior. But no matter how hard we try, no matter how many good deeds we may do to make up for our sins, the wages for sin is still “death.” It’s in God’s very nature to deal with any sin in a holy, just way. No exceptions. No favoritism.

Many people would like it if death were the end of everything. For them, death becomes like an escape from life and all it’s problems and from all our bad behavior, and it cancels out all our debts. But death isn’t the end of everything, as many people think. Hebrews 9:27 says, “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment…” After death, we all have to face God’s judgment. One day Jesus is going to come back to this world in glory as the Judge (Mt16:27; Ac10:42). Whether we like it or not, we all have an inescapable appointment with this judgment. We won’t be able to hide in our graves. Even if we’ve been cremated and our ashes scattered to the wind, he’ll bring us back to stand before him. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” And when he judges us for what we did, it’ll be extremely hard to pass, because he not only looks at our secrets and everything we ever did, but also at our motives, the reasons behind what we did (Ro2:6–9). It’s like he’s tracking all our spending habits, all the data we claimed on our tax returns, all our words, all our thoughts—way more intense than all the cell phone, email and web surfing info collected by the NSA. In our lives, if we ever happened to actually do what was right, did we really do it for the right reasons, or for self-seeking reasons? And even one slip ruins our whole life record. His judgment is very accurate, deep and thorough. Many people are lulled into a rosy view of themselves. They think they’re pretty good persons who’ve lived pretty good lives. Malachi 3:2 says, “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” At that time, all the things we thought were our righteous acts will look like filthy rags (Isa64:6).

After judgment, there’s one last consequence of sin. Revelation 21:8 says, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” “Consign” means permanently transferred. It’s interesting that the first people on this list of those who go to hell are the cowardly and unbelieving. God seems to consider being cowardly and unbelieving as the worst sins. Hell isn’t just the ranting of religious fanatics. Jesus himself warned his disciples about this terrible place. Quoting Isaiah’s prophecy he described it as the place “where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mk9:48; Isa66:24). He also called it “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” and a “place of torment” for those who lived self-indulgent lives (Mt25:41; Lk16:23,28). It’s really not in vogue to threaten people with hell. But we can’t cut it out of the Bible just because we don’t like it. Jesus mainly proclaimed the good news of the kingdom for all who believe, but once in a while he also talked about hell as a healthy warning. Once he told his disciples, “But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Lk12:5). Hell is the final, most terrible consequence of sin. Many deny its reality, but one day they’ll find out in horror that they were totally wrong. When we think about the reality and consequences of sin, it changes our whole view of life, or whole way of thinking about ourselves and about others. Life is no longer all fun and games. And people are not as fine as they let on.

Sin is really bad news. But God himself provided good news. Read verse 3 again. Christ died for our sins. His death is God’s free gift of grace to us (Ro3:24; 6:23b; Eph1:6). It’s something we could never in a million years earn or deserve, but only something we can receive humbly, by faith. But how does Christ’s death resolve all our deeply rooted, complex sin issues? In John 1:29 John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and exclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus is the Holy and Righteous One (Ac3:14); he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin (Heb4:15). And even though he never sinned, sinless Jesus became sin for us (2Co5:21). Isaiah 53:5 puts it in poetic form: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” On the cross Jesus took all the punishment we deserve. Though we used to live as God’s enemies, in Jesus we’re fully reconciled to God (Ro5:10). When we accept his death, though our sins are so many, we’re now holy in God’s sight, without blemish and free from accusation (Col1:22). Apostle Peter, quoting from Isaiah 53:5, wrote: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’” When we look at Jesus on the cross, God’s forgiveness comes to us and washes away all our guilt, fear, hatred, anger, bitterness and grudges. There’s no wound too deep that he can’t heal. We’re no longer defined by our sins, by our wounds or by our past. The healing in his wounds gives us a new self, created in God’s own image with a growing personal knowledge of God (Col3:10; cf. 2Co5:17). His healing gives us real contentment and even healthy self-respect. His healing gives us deep peace, peace with God and peace with one another (Lk1:79; 2:14; Jn14:27; Ro5:1; 12:18; 14:17,19; 2Co13:11).

Underlying the statement “Christ died for our sins” is the meaning of his shed blood. Romans 3:25a says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.” Ephesians 1:7 says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace…” Simply, when we believe in his blood, God forgives all our sins. Peter calls it “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” and says his blood redeems us from the empty way of life handed down to us from our ancestors (1Pe1:18–19). His shed blood sets us free from being enslaved to the empty way of life, a life lived for self, for pleasure and for the things of the world. His shed blood also does something deep within us. Hebrews 9:14 says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” 1 John 1:7 says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” His shed blood becomes our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1Co1:30b). Christ’s death for our sins reveals God’s great love (1Jn4:10). God didn’t spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, so that we might live (Jn3:16; Ro8:32). This good news becomes real for us when we personally believe it. When we believe this good news, a cosmic change happens; we cross over from death to life (Jn5:24).

But if Christ had only died for our sins, the story would seem like any other tragic story. But his death was not the end. Read verse 4. Christ’s resurrection is the other half of the good news of the gospel. But what does it mean, and why is it such good news for us? First of all, his resurrection proves that God is living. Evil men crucified Jesus and thought they could do away with him forever. But God Almighty raised him from the dead (Ac2:23–24). His resurrection shows us the justice of God. God refused to let the body of his Holy One see decay (Ac2:27,31). Christ’s resurrection is also proof that one day God will judge this world with justice (Ac17:31). Many people assumed that because he was arrested, tried and condemned to die, Jesus must have been guilty of something. But when God raised him from the dead, he completely vindicated Jesus. In the same way, through his resurrection, God completely vindicates or “justifies” us (Ro4:25). Christ’s resurrection power is available to all who believe; it actually gives us the power to live a new life (Ro6:4–5).

Just as sin is a widespread reality we often choose to ignore, so is death. We’d like to sanitize life from death. So we take dying old people out of our homes, away from our children, and put them in nursing homes. When someone seems to be dying, we call 911, and an ambulance whisks them away to die in a hospital, where no one has to see what happens. We’d like to pretend we’re invincible and ignore our frailties that tell us we’re going to die. People fight aging with Botox and hair dye and Propecia. Death makes many of us afraid (Heb2:15). Death makes life seem meaningless (Ecc1:14). But Christ’s resurrection is the good news. 2 Timothy 1:10 says, “…but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Christ’s resurrection gives us a living hope. 1 Peter 1:3–4 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.” The world tries to seduce us with all kinds of dead and dying hopes. Only in the Risen Christ is there living hope. Because he rose from the dead, when we believe in him, we have the hope of his second coming, the hope to see him again, which is a real hope in God (1Pe1:13,21). With this hope to one day see him as he is, we strive to purify ourselves so that we can be ready to meet him (1Jn3:2–3). Because he rose from the dead, those who died believing in him are not lost; he will raise them from the dead, and we will get to be with him and with them forever (1Th4:13–18). So are we living with dead hopes, or with this living hope?

In verses 5–8 Paul lists Christ’s six well-attested resurrection appearances. Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t just a spiritual metaphor. In this case, he was literally, bodily raised from the dead, seen and touched by those who’d lived with him. It wasn’t just imaginary thinking; even 500 people all saw him at the same time, so that couldn’t be a mass delusion. For some people, it’s hard to believe anyone could really be raised from the dead. But all the testimony of eyewitnesses is hard to deny. Also, Paul’s own change is another dramatic evidence that the resurrection of Jesus is true. How could such a formerly proud, self-righteous, legalistic person be changed into a humble man of God’s grace? Some Corinthians were looking at Paul from a human point of view. They didn't think they had to listen to him. So he mentions here how the Risen Christ met him and made him an apostle by his grace. We too need to get past looking at people with our human thinking and listen to the gospel message from his servants.

Today we mainly thought about the gospel: Christ’s death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead. During this Easter season, may God really remind us of this gospel and make it our personal good news. May God help us to hold firmly to this gospel, and pass it on as of first importance.