

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Resurrection And The Gospel I Corinthians 15:1-11

Today we begin the great resurrection chapter, First Corinthians 15, which is undoubtedly the climax of this whole book. This chapter was written because a subtle but serious doctrinal problem had crept into the Corinthian local church. A handful were denying the fact that Christ had been raised from the dead but many were denying that all Christians would be bodily resurrected after death at the second coming. Whenever the Bible speaks of resurrection, it is always of the body, not of the soul and the spirit.

Most of the Corinthian Christians were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy which taught that the body was a prison for the soul and at death the soul was set free from the body and passed on into eternal oblivion. Therefore, there were some who were questioning whether Christians would be raised bodily from the dead. The fact of Christ's resurrection, while questioned by some, was generally assumed, for He was a unique case.

In some ways we can be thankful for this serious doctrinal error, for had it not happened we would have never had this marvelous chapter on the resurrection.

There are three basic points about this chapter that must be understood. First, as we have said, it is speaking about the resurrection of the body and not the immortality of the soul, for any Greek would admit the soul survived after death. The resurrection of the body is unique and peculiar to Christianity. Second, this chapter is dealing with the resurrection of Christians and not unbelievers. The Bible teaches that all men will get a resurrected body but some will be raised to eternal bliss and others to eternal destruction.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

Third, the Apostle Paul is describing an event that will take place at the Second Advent at which time Christ will make a personal appearance on this earth. This chapter says nothing about the experience of believers between death and resurrection. Yet, the Bible seems to imply that the God-spirit of the Christian at death will go directly to be with Christ, waiting the final resurrection.

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (II Cor. 5:8).

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Philip. 1:23).

THE RESURRECTION IS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE GOSPEL 15:1-2

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you. Paul reminds these Corinthians of the gospel he preached to them when he first came to Corinth. The gospel he preached had as its bedrock the death and resurrection of Christ. This is a subtle rebuke to these Corinthians because they had forgotten the essentials of the gospel. They did not appreciate the gospel by which they were saved, and had forgotten how important the resurrection is to the gospel of Christ.

Which you received. These Corinthians had received the gospel of Christ and were saved the moment they believed Christ was their Savior for their sins and resurrected Lord. A person can only believe once and be saved once, for once we are truly saved, we can never be lost.

And on which you have taken your stand. Those who have received Christ now stand in Him. The gospel makes the Christian stand. In Christ, a Christian finds love, acceptance, understanding and support for the trials of life. He has a foundation, an anchor, a place to handle the pressures of life, a security in the midst of turmoil. Why? Because Christians have been loved by God, and now they have a sense of certainty about the uncertain future, a refuge when they fail, and a security to deal with their emotional weaknesses. Christ can wash away their sins, heal their hurts, restore their failure and start them out anew as they lean upon His strength and grace. The gospel does give us a place to stand.

By this gospel you are saved. Those who receive Christ not only stand in Him but they are also being saved right now by the grace of a sovereign God. Literally this says, "You are being saved." Salvation is present as well as past, progressive as well as positional. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to understand that the resurrected Christ was working in them right then. Through every trial, every difficulty, every hurt and every blessing, God is presently saving the Christian, conforming him more and more to the image of Christ. He is saving us so that our time on this earth will be meaningful and profitable. The gospel does save us and is saving us right now. We need the gospel today as much as we needed it the day we were first saved. As Christians we must be constantly going back to the truths of the Cross - forgiveness, acceptance, righteousness, grace, love and mercy.

If you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. Notice Paul adds a condition. He says, "If you hold firmly." It seems he is saying it is possible to believe in vain. A person can have an emotional or intellectual superficial human faith that accepts the words of the gospel as a kind of insurance policy against going to hell, but the gospel has not penetrated into and changed that person's life so there are new desires for Christ, new striving for righteousness, new patterns for living. There can be a mechanical conformity to Christianity that never sees any need for faith, for change, for dynamic, for

discipline, for Bible study, for prayer, for evangelism or for fellowship. This is believing in vain. Why? If a person has really met the resurrected Christ by faith, his or her life will be changed.

Christianity is not facts, head knowledge, ritual or religion. Christianity is knowing and loving the resurrected Christ. It is holding fast to the truths about the death and resurrection of Christ.

What then is Paul's point? There is no gospel, there is no salvation apart from the resurrected Christ whom Paul will write about in the next nine verses and show how He appeared and changed people's lives when they met Him.

THE RESURRECTION WAS VALIDATED BY THE SCRIPTURES 15:3-4

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance. Paul will now give the Corinthian Christians those truths about the gospel which are fundamental and foundational to our understanding of Christianity. The Apostle did not make up the gospel but received it directly from the resurrected Christ.

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11-12).

The gospel Paul declared to these Corinthians was not based on superstition, or on evolution of religious ideas, nor did it spring up from unusual emotional circumstances. Neither did Paul get it from the other Apostles, but the gospel was given to him by the resurrected Christ Himself.

That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. The gospel is not just that Christ died, but that He died for a specific purpose. He died for sin. He died as a substitution for our sins. Christ bore in His body our sins, our curse, our hell and our unbelief. He died in the sinner's place. Multiple thousands of men have died as martyrs for good causes, but only one man, Jesus Christ, died for sin and sinners. At the Cross, Christ died for our failures, our weaknesses, our rebellion and our sinful lifestyles. He did it that we might be brought to God.

Almost every humanistic philosophy or religion today accepts the fact that Christ lived and died as a mere man, but there is no good news in that the gospel is good news—the good news that Christ's death accomplished something for us. It changed us. It delivered us. It set us free.

The death of Christ was not just some whim of men. It was predicted and anticipated in the Old Testament and fulfilled to the letter, and this is recorded for us in the New Testament. The Scriptures are always our authority as Christians. All of our theology must be based in the Scriptures, not in human experience.

That he was buried. Paul mentions the burial of Christ to drive home the reality of His death. His body died, was buried, and it was that dead body which rose from the grave alive again. Perhaps Paul mentioned the burial also as a challenge to the unsaved world to explain the empty tomb. For two thousand years, infidels and atheists have been trying to explain the empty tomb, and none of their explanations hold water. You could have never convinced

anyone who saw the death of Christ that He merely fainted in a swoon or fell into a deep coma. No, they knew Christ was dead, and without that death, the resurrection has no meaning.

That he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. The Old Testament predicted the resurrection of Christ and, it happened just like the prophets said it would. Christ was not merely resuscitated, but He was resurrected from the dead. The resurrection is an integral part of the gospel, and we have not declared the gospel unless we make mention of the resurrection.

That is the story of the gospel--three basic facts. These are not doctrines; these are not philosophies; these are not ideas that men have had about what God should be like. These are simple, hard-nose facts that occurred in history that cannot be eliminated or evaded. There they are. These facts have changed the history of the world. Our faith does not rest upon mere philosophy but upon facts that have occurred and cannot be taken away from us (Ray Stedman, I Corinthians).

THE RESURRECTION WAS VALIDATED BY WITNESSES 15:5-7

And that he appeared to Peter. Paul in verses 5-8 gives eyewitness evidence the resurrection of Christ actually happened. He makes it clear that Christ appeared to Peter who was the leader of the apostolic band. Surely, Peter needed the resurrected Christ to appear to him. He was deeply hurting because he had denied his Lord three times and even cursed Him. Peter went out and wept bitterly when he realized what he had done. For he was suffering the pangs of guilt and self-anger. Perhaps it was for this reason Christ sought Peter out first. Christ healed his pains, his brokenness and his hatred of himself. Wouldn't you have liked to have been there when Christ said, "Peter, it is I, your Lord, and I forgive you and love you and want you to continue to lead my apostolic band." Certainly, the resurrected Christ changed a depressed and discouraged Peter to a forgiven, courageous and dynamic witness for Christ.

And then to the Twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time. Christ was seen by hundreds of people after His resurrection. Enemies of the gospel claim that the followers of Christ were so emotionally distraught about His death that they began to hallucinate and imagine that they saw Him alive. It may be possible for twelve men to hallucinate, but not five hundred. There is no question that Christ's resurrection could be easily defended in our courts today if we could produce five hundred witnesses. Matthew Arnold said, "The resurrection is the best attested fact in history."

Most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Twenty-six years after the resurrection of our Lord, there were many eyewitnesses still living, and if the Corinthians wanted to, they could check these facts out with hundreds of people.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. The James mentioned here is most likely the half brother of Jesus, who was the oldest remaining son of the family that grew up in Nazareth. John tells us that Christ's brothers did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. It must have been difficult to see Jesus was the Messiah because these brothers were so close to

Him. While they must have seen Him as an exceptional person, they played games together, did chores together, played pranks on Him or whatever. It took some tall convincing for them to believe that He was the Son of God, the Creator of the universe. None of Christ's brothers were truly converted until after the resurrection. That was when they became convinced Jesus was the Son of God. James must have had a fantastic conversion and in the Epistle of James he calls Christ "our glorious Lord" (Jms. 2:1). The resurrected Christ changed a skeptical blood brother to a believing, dynamic spiritual leader.

THE RESURRECTION WAS VALIDATED BY THE CHANGED LIFE OF PAUL 15:8-11

And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. Paul was the last apostle to see the resurrected Christ and it happened on the road to Damascus. He was on his way as the feisty Jewish evangelist named Saul to imprison and put to death Christians in the name of God so as to stamp out this little Jewish cult. When the Lord appeared to him, a light brighter than the sun shone around him and he heard the voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And the voice identified Himself by saying, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Paul never forgot his conversion. The sovereign Christ supernaturally intervened in his life. If there was ever a dynamic conversion, Paul had it. This appearance of the Lord to him changed his whole life—from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the preacher, from religious profession to personal regeneration. He came hating and went away loving. He began that day the greatest Jewish evangelist and ended it the greatest Christian evangelist. Contact with the resurrected Christ changed his life, and this, in itself, is proof the resurrection happened.

Paul says he was one who was "abnormally born" which really means a miscarriage or an untimely birth. What he means is that he did not come to spiritual birth in the usual, proper way. His salvation was unexpected, violent and abnormal. When the other apostles heard the Word they began to believe it. Gradually it developed in their minds and hearts until at last they laid hold of it by faith. In this way, their spiritual birth followed a normal pregnancy that could be observed developing. But Paul's conversion was a miscarriage. It was abnormal, unexpected, sudden and definitely supernatural. This may be the reason Paul writes so much on the sovereign purposes of God in salvation, for he, more than any other apostle, had a conversion surrounded by supernatural phenomena.

Paul should have never been saved much less become an apostle. At this point, I think he interrupts his main thought on resurrection to praise his God for infinite, sovereign grace. The very thought of his salvation brought Paul to worship the living, resurrected Christ.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. Paul's salvation humbled him because he knew his depraved moral character before salvation. He was not worthy of salvation or apostleship. He knew he deserved nothing from God but hell because he ordered Christians to be killed in the name of God. His qualifications for salvation and apostleship were zero, zip, nothing, so if he had anything it was by the pure grace of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am. He turns his thoughts from his own sinfulness and unworthiness as Saul, the zealot, the persecutor, the murderer, and puts them on the Lord Jesus Christ and the infinite grace of God that saved him and that made him an apostle. Paul

clearly understood he did not seek and choose God, but God sought and chose him for salvation and service. He deserved nothing, but God took him and made him the greatest Christian of all time. Why? Grace! Grace! Grace! Everything Paul was or did he attributed to the pure grace of God.

Paul's life should greatly encourage every non-Christian and Christian. We may have fouled up our lives and messed up everything to such an extent we may think God could never save us or use us. Paul persecuted the church and gave his consent to murder, yet God used him and He can and will use anyone who truly turns to Christ in humble repentance and faith. There is no sin God cannot forgive.

And his grace to me was not without effect. This literally says "not without effort." Now Paul looks at his response to God's grace. When God shed His grace on Paul, it resulted in action on Paul's part. God's grace did not make him a dried up, cold, hyper-Calvinist. Because he was so deeply touched by God's grace, Paul never got over his salvation and he wanted to serve the Christ who saved him. An understanding of God's sovereign grace made Paul more zealous for the Lord.

No, I worked harder than all of them. Paul toiled to the point of exhaustion in the Lord's work out of appreciation for what the Lord had done for him in grace. He, not bragging but being factual, said he had done more than all the other apostles put together. An appreciation of the love, mercy and grace of God drove him to do great things for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice carefully he talked about his works or labors which surely included prayers, afflictions and suffering, involving blood sweat and tears, but he said nothing about results.

Results always belong to the Lord. The Christian can only be faithful.

Yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. What may have sounded like a conceited statement, Paul relates to the grace of God. Any and all of his efforts were directly related to God. It was the resurrected Christ who was giving him the power, the strength, the motivation, the ability, the skill so as to accomplish great things for God. There is only one explanation for the fact that the greatest persecutor of the church came to surpass all others in apostolic fervor and success--his vision of and his relationship with the resurrected Christ, the great dispenser of grace.

Grace is much like a father who gives his son some money to buy the father a present. The father gives the money to the boy that the boy might have the joy of getting his dad a gift. Yet, the father receives joy in return when the boy gives him the present.

This is exactly what God did for Paul. The Heavenly Father gave Paul the grace to do great labors for Him and what Paul was offering to the Father, through his labors, was actually given to him by the Father. The result was that the Father received the glory for the original grace which was given to Paul.

Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. It did not make any difference which apostle preached the gospel; it was always the same gospel: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,.. He was buried, and... He was raised on the third day." The gospel was preached and the Corinthians believed it, and a basic part of that gospel is the resurrection of Christ. What Paul is saying is that no man, woman, boy or girl can really be a true Christian unless he or she believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

CONCLUSION

The question for you who are not Christians is not whether you believe Christ lived and died; many non-Christians believe that. Nor is it whether you believe He died for sinners and was raised from the dead, for many phony, professing believers give assent to that truth. The real question is whether you believe Christ died for your sins and that He was raised from the dead so you can share His resurrected life.

Only when you, by faith, make this personal, believing Christ died for you individually and personally, will you be saved. You cannot be saved without believing Christ substituted for your sins, and you cannot be saved until you have committed yourself to the resurrected Lord.

Believe in Christ. Ask God to give you the grace to believe. Take that initial step of faith in Christ and you will be able to say as the Apostle Paul, "By the grace of God I am what I am."