

# The Gospel: The message of first importance

## 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

*Pastor Tim Melton*

Can you imagine what it must have been like for the followers of Jesus on Saturday, the day after Jesus had been crucified? All was lost. Jesus was dead. They had given up everything to follow Jesus. Everything in them had sensed that He was truly who He said He was. They believed with all of their hearts that He was the promised Messiah and Savior who had been prophesied about all the way back to the early chapters of Genesis.

Yes, they had run away when Jesus was arrested. Yes, they feared death as much as the next person, but they truly believed. Every verse of prophecy that had been foretold about the Messiah came true in the life of Jesus Christ.

For those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, there was no mistaking that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah. Truly the Savior had come . . . and now He was dead. Even though Jesus had warned them, it was as if they never saw it coming (John 2:18-22; Matthew 12:39-40; Matthew 16:21; Matthew 27:62-64).

They were familiar with the prophecies. They had heard Jesus' words about his upcoming death, burial and resurrection, but in the midst of the struggle and devastation they had "forgotten" the truth that they had built their lives upon.

So many times we do the same. Life has suddenly become so difficult that we focus our attention on the storm that rages around us and we forget about the rock on which our life is built (Matthew 7:24-27). We forget the promises of Christ and the character of God. We begin to worry and doubt like one who has no God, but that is not who we are. That is not whose we are.

The Saturday after the crucifixion must have been so difficult for Jesus' disciples, but we must remember that we can never truly evaluate Saturday's situation until we can view it from Sunday's perspective. We can never know the truth about a situation until we have heard God's perspective.

In the book of Acts the primary responsibility of the Apostles was to be witnesses of what they had seen. Because of this, Jesus gave them “many proofs appearing to them for 40 days” after his resurrection. Jesus then sent them out “to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the world.” They were not sent out to establish a new systematic theology. They were not scholars or philosophers. They were common men who were supposed to tell what they had seen and explain what it meant. They had seen Jesus do many things, but their primary testimony was to that of His resurrection. This was one primary factor when the disciples looked for a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:21-22. It had to be one who had been with them since the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He had to join them in their task of being eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection.

They would testify to Jesus’ coming to earth, to his sinlessness, to His miracles, to His being the Son of God, to His dying for the sins of man, but all of these would be proven by Christ’s resurrection.

As we look to the writings of the early church, the resurrection of Christ is the proof that everything else about Christ is true. Romans 1:4 tells us how Jesus was declared to be the Son of God . . . by His resurrection from the dead.

Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the King, the Christ, and it all hinges on the fact that he was raised from the dead. Throughout the book of Acts, the Apostles defend themselves before the Sanhedrin, the priests, the government officials, to non-believers, by appealing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to which they were eyewitnesses (Acts 4:10-11). Even their sermons focused on Jesus and His resurrection. It was the key. We see this in Acts 2, 3, 4 and 5. Many had claimed to be great teachers. Many had proclaimed themselves the promised messiah. Thousands had been crucified by the Romans. But none had ever been raised from the dead.

The death of Jesus was essential because it paid the price for our sin, but crucifixion itself would not have been out of the ordinary for Jesus’ day. Yes, it was savage and barbaric, but it alone did not bear testimony that sin had been forgiven and that death had been conquered. It was only through the resurrection of Christ that we know that the penalty for sin had been paid in full and that death had been conquered. Romans 6:9 says, *“We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.”*

In the words of John MacArthur, *“It comes down to the simple reality that the entire destiny of man hinges on whether Jesus Christ is simply a crucified rabbi, whose body lies long rotting in some forgotten Palestinian tomb, or whether, in fact, He is God, as proven by His resurrection.”*

The Resurrection of Christ is essential if one is to be a follower of Christ. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, *“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”*

Throughout the book of 1 Corinthians we see that the people of the church in Corinth had been saved out of the pagan culture of Corinth, but they continued to be plagued by the inability to keep the culture out of the church. In previous chapters we had seen this displayed by sexual immorality, drunkenness,

infighting and false teaching inside the church. On this issue of resurrection, the pagan understanding is once again causing havoc in the church.

Out of the Greek culture came a belief known as philosophical dualism. It was made famous by Plato. It believed that anything material was evil and anything spiritual was good. Plato said, *“The body is a prison that binds the spirit, and the man waits to be released from his prison.”*

With this in mind, Plato and his followers believed when a person died the spirit and the body would be separated. The body, which they believed to be evil, would be left to decompose, and the spirit would become part of the spirit world. To the Greeks, the spirit associated with any form of body would still be associating one with evil in the afterlife. Plato and the Greeks had no place for any bodily form of resurrection after death.

In our own world there are different beliefs concerning the afterlife. Some believe in reincarnation, but as Christians we do not. Hebrews 9:27 declares that, *“man is appointed to die once, and after that to face judgment.”* Others believe in oblivion or extinction after you die. They say that your mind ceases to function, the spirit does not exist, and the body returns to dust as it decomposes. Others believe that one’s spirit rejoins or is absorbed by some sort of spiritual force or divinity. Each of these implies a loss of personhood and individual identity. None of these are in line with the teachings of scripture. The Bible teaches that believers will be resurrected and will be reunited with Christ in glorified bodies and will live with Him for eternity. We will retain our personhood and our relationship with God.

Those in the Corinthian church were not denying the resurrection of Christ. They were denying the bodily resurrection of believers. Most were Christians. They believed in the resurrection, but had never understood the truth or the ramifications of the resurrected life for believers.

Because of this, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15. Paul divided his response to this problem into three parts. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 talks about the bodily resurrection of Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:12-34 talks about the resurrection of the dead. And 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 talks about the resurrection body. In this lesson we are focusing on 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, the resurrection of Christ.

Paul started out reminding those in the Corinthian church of what they already believed.

*<sup>1</sup>Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup>and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

We must remember that Paul was their spiritual father. God had used him to preach the gospel so that people might believe. Once they put their faith in Jesus, Paul had been the first one to disciple them and teach them the ways of God.

Paul is not scolding them as spiritual castaways. Even though the congregation had been through many struggles with sin and disunity, still Paul reminds them as brothers. He chooses to relate with them based on their identity in Christ and not their recent patterns of sin. He reminds them of the gospel that

he preached and which they had received. It is this gospel which saved them initially from sin and condemnation and it is this same salvation that is continuing to work in their lives to make them more like Christ. His gospel reminder applies to all, except for those who somehow have believed in vain.

In scripture we see reference to a kind of belief that does not lead to salvation. In James 2:19, it mentions how that even demons believe, but surely they are not followers of Christ. In James 2:26, we see that ***“faith without works is dead.”***

In Mark 4:14-20, Jesus tells the parable of a sower who plants seeds on four different soils. The soil represents the condition of one's heart, and the seed represents the gospel.

The first heart described has no openness to God's Word. The second receives the Word of God with joy and excitement, but once difficult times come, they fall away. The third seems to grow, but are “choked” out by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for things other than God's Word. In the end, it becomes clear that the good soil, one who has truly received God's Word, the one that bore fruit, was really the only soil or heart that truly believed unto salvation. The others seemed to have possessed a level of belief for a while, but it was not sufficient to save.

Saving faith brings about an inward change that comes from God. The Holy Spirit comes to live within us and becomes our guarantee of life in Christ and eternal life. We are a new creature with a new nature. Our affections are turned from sin to the things of God. We are made new. Some may seem to have a saving faith, but in the end show themselves to not be in the faith at all. One might get excited about Christian ideas for a while. They might find the stories of the Bible interesting. They might even pray a salvation prayer and get baptized. They might appear to be serious about faith, but later turn away from the faith. True faith is confirmed through persevering in the faith.

***<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, (...)***

Out of all the important truths that Paul could have chosen, he chose this one. The Gospel. There are many doctrines that are important, but they all serve to support the gospel or flow from it. The message of first importance, that has the power to save, is the gospel. Here Paul gives us a summary of the gospel essentials. In this one sentence we find “our sins”, “Christ's death”, “His burial” and “His resurrection”, all in accordance to the Scriptures. This phrase *“in accordance with the Scriptures”* includes the prophecies, but it also includes a biblical understanding of the Christ, our sins, Christ's atonement and the importance of the resurrection.

In regards to sin, ***“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”*** (Romans 3:23). ***“Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that he does not hear.”*** (Isaiah 59:2). ***“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”*** (Romans 6:23).

In regards to Christ's death and burial, Christ's death had been prophesied by Christ Himself and by prophecies in scripture (Isaiah 53, John 2:18-22, Matthew 12:39-40, Matthew 16:21, Matthew 27:62-64). It was confirmed by Roman soldiers who were experts of death and who had thrust a spear through Jesus' side (John 19:31-35). His burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was prophesied 700 years earlier, in Isaiah 53:9, where it says, *"And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death."*

Paul was speaking as one recipient to others. Like one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. He was not the holy one speaking to sinners. He, too, knew the pain of sin and the deliverance of Christ. He was proclaiming the death of Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One. Jesus had died and been resurrected in both body and spirit.

*(...) <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*

Paul now spoke to defend the truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ. He was bolstering a belief that the Corinthians already claimed to possess. In a court of law one of the most convincing truths is an eyewitness account. Because of this, Paul begins to explain to the Corinthians. Jesus appeared to Cephas, which was another name for Peter. Jesus then appeared to the twelve. At this point it was not literally twelve, because Judas was no longer with them, but "the twelve" had become a title for the group of the closest followers of Jesus that He had chosen.

In Jesus' first appearance to the twelve, in Luke 24, Jesus says:

*"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate before them.*

Jesus wanted to make clear that he was not a ghost or merely some spirit from the dead. He had been brought to life. It was a bodily resurrection. Death had truly been defeated. He proved that by allowing them to touch him and by eating in their presence.

Paul also noted that Jesus had appeared to five hundred believers at one time, and most of them were still alive. If one wanted, they could talk with them and hear it for themselves. Jesus had also appeared to James, His brother who had been a skeptic, and now was the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

*<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the*

*grace of God that is with me.<sup>11</sup> Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

Paul then finally mentioned himself. Christ appeared to Paul in Acts 9. He had been a hater of the church of God. He had led in arresting Christians, some of whom were even put to death because of their faith. And yet, by the grace of God, Christ had come to Paul. The eyewitness accounts are a convincing reason to believe in the resurrection of Christ, but an even stronger proof is the dramatic change in Paul's life. There is no logical way to explain how Paul, a persecutor of Christians, would become a champion of Christianity who was even willing to lay down his life for the cause of Christ.

Paul's testimony reminds us that salvation is not earned by good works. It is a free gift of God. No matter what you have done or are doing, no one is beyond the reach of God. Turn from your sin and put your faith in Jesus Christ and be saved.

For those of you who are already in the faith, take note that Paul worked hard for the sake of Christ, but there are two interesting points of which we need to make note. It was not out of guilt or to earn anything that Paul served Christ. His work for Christ was a natural response to the unbelievable gift of grace that he had received (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). He also claimed no glory for himself. All motivation and credit was due to the grace of God at work in His life.

We each must seek to more fully understand the gospel and to know Christ. As we grow in our awareness of our sin and in our knowledge of His grace, our hearts will be captivated more and more by the gospel and our lives will be compelled to live out the love and grace that we have received.

Christ has risen from the dead. Sin has been defeated that we too may look forward to resurrection and eternal life.

### Discussion questions:

1. If you asked the people around you what they think will happen after they die, what answers do you think you might receive?
2. What about 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 do you find most interesting or confusing?
3. Why is the resurrection so important in the gospel story?
4. How would you explain Plato's "spiritual dualism" in your own words? Why would this view of death contradict the bodily resurrection of Christ?
5. Why do you think some people have such a hard time believing that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead?
6. What from these scriptures strengthen our belief in the resurrection of Christ?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this lesson?
8. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this lesson?