

OUR RISEN LORD JESUS CHRIST

SERIES: SPIRITUAL REALITIES IN THE CHURCH

By Doug Goins

I remember a conversation I had a few years ago, standing on the sidelines of a youth soccer game. A friend and I were watching our sons play and talking. He was a very successful, prominent businessman in our community. We had become friends because our boys had played soccer together since they were little kids. We were talking about news we had just received that another friend, a relatively young man who served on the school board in our town, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. I'll never forget what my friend said to me: "I am scared to death of dying." He caught his unintended pun and chuckled. But he was honestly expressing what most people feel. Even with increased life expectancy, tremendous advances in medical technology and pain management, and all kinds of philosophical and therapeutic approaches to death, no one has found a way to lessen people's fear of dying.

This is not some new psychosis; it's as old as the human race. King David, the great warrior and leader of the nation of Israel, wrote about his feelings toward death in Psalm 55:4-5 (NIV):

**"My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me."**

Fear is the normal human response to the unknown, and the personal experience of dying is an unknown for all of us.

In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul faces this unavoidable reality head-on. In verse 26 he speaks as a realist: "The last enemy that will be abolished is death." Death is truly an enemy. But in coming to grips with that enemy, Paul doesn't take us into a philosopher's lecture hall, some cryogenics laboratory, or a psychologist's office. He takes us to an empty tomb where an angelic messenger said, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen." (Luke 24:5b-6a.)

We're going to devote several messages to chapter 15. It's one of the most beautiful, exhilarating passages in all of literature. Paul communicates his powerful conviction that death has been conquered through the resurrection victory of Jesus Christ. This long chapter is a comprehensive study of the relationship between life and death, of the triumph of eternal life in Christ over the fear of death, of the absolute certainty we can have of our own bodily resurrection after death, and of the implications for each one of us here and now. We will learn about personally appropriating the resurrection life of Christ so that we can come to grips with death in order to live life to the fullest.

Now, Paul was writing to a very adolescent church. They were relatively new Christians, impressionable and easily influenced by the culture around them, as any adolescent is. We've already examined their confusion over many issues: singleness and marriage, idolatry, freedom and responsibility in the Christian life, headship in the home and in the church, their use and misuse of spiritual gifts, and, most recently, their self-absorption in worship. So it shouldn't come as any surprise to us that they're perplexed about the fear of death.

The culture that was informing them was Greek. The Greeks didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Remember the story in Acts 17 of how Paul came to the great intellectual center of Athens and preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as historic reality. They laughed at him. They thought a dead

body's being raised to life was a silly idea. Most Greek philosophers considered the human body a prison, and they believed that at death the soul was freed to a kind of immortality, but it involved the complete dissolution of the conscious identity and personality into the cosmos, or absorption into some kind of divinity. Some schools of philosophy in Greece denied any kind of afterlife at all. All of these ancient perspectives are also very modern. We hear our contemporaries in the world talk these same ways about the possibility of life after death.

So these young Christians in Corinth were more pagan than Biblical in their understanding of life and death. They were afraid of being disembodied spirits, because they hadn't yet embraced the Christian conviction that human beings will experience resurrection to eternal life. Paul addresses their confusion with the reality of Christ's own bodily resurrection. He says succinctly in 15:12, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

Paul begins in verses 1-11 by pointing to what the Corinthians did believe: Christ rose from the dead. That is the key to Paul's argument that believers will also be resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is, moreover, the primary truth of the Christian faith, the foundation of the gospel. Without a belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection, there can be no personal salvation. That will become clear in these verses. Look at how Paul summarizes the gospel in verses 1-5:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

THE GOSPEL ON WHICH WE STAND

Notice that Paul begins the chapter with a word of reminder. He isn't proclaiming the gospel to these Corinthians for the first time. They have already heard the gospel and have believed this great good news that in Jesus Christ, God fulfilled his Old-Testament promises and opened a way of salvation to all people. But with a note of urgency, Paul tells them he has to teach it to them again. They have to rethink and review just what the gospel is.

Now, why would those believers in Jesus Christ need this review? Why do you need to hear again the essence of the gospel? Because we all very easily forget fundamental truths. Could you go out right now and explain the gospel to a nonbelieving friend? Hopefully, as we work through this passage, we'll have a greater confidence that we understand and can explain what the gospel is.

Paul offers three phrases from verses 1-2 that define the benefit of the gospel. The three phrases focus on salvation past, present, and future.

Look at the first phrase: "The gospel...which also you received." They received salvation through trust in the good news of Christ's death and resurrection, and their lives were transformed. They were receptive to this saving message that Paul had offered, and they could look back to that point in time. And it's as true for each one of us as well. You can remember the time, perhaps the very moment and the place, when you opened your heart to this life-saving reality. Or perhaps you remember the process you went through of coming to that point of conviction.

The second phrase speaks of their present experience: "In which [gospel] also you stand." The tense of the verb "stand" refers to a past completed action with ongoing results. So they are presently standing on the gospel as their foundation for life. And that's what the gospel does for us in the present. In a dangerous, seductive, slippery world, it protects us, stabilizes us, keeps us standing securely.

The third phrase: "By which [gospel] also you are saved." Literally in the original Greek language it says, "You *are being* saved." Our salvation is an ongoing process. Paul tells us 2 Corinthians 3:18 that we are being changed "from glory to glory." What Jesus did for us was a glorious event in the past, but his work

in us is continuing, and we'll be ultimately glorified and completed. So we live in anticipation of this full salvation, the finished work when we stand before the Lord. The gospel makes us tremendously optimistic and hopeful about the future.

There is a word of conditionality here: "If you hold fast unless you believed in vain." The term "in vain" literally means "at random" or "without basis." In the paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson turns that conditional phrase into a parenthetical statement: "(I'm assuming, now, that your belief was the real thing and not a passing fancy, that you're in this for good and holding fast.)" (1). Faith that is in vain or a passing fancy is a superficial response to the gospel, such as seeing it as fire insurance: "I don't want to go to hell, so I'll accept Jesus." Or it may be a response of selfishness: "I want Jesus because I won't feel as guilty, and things will work better in my life." It's a way of adding value to your life. Paul would consider those responses vain or empty in terms of any stabilizing reality in people's lives.

Let me summarize these first two verses. Paul says he had come to Corinth and preached the message of the gospel, and saving faith had transformed their lives. An integral part of the gospel message was the fact of Christ's resurrection. After all, a dead savior can't save anybody. Paul's readers had received the word, they had trusted Christ, and they were now standing on that word as the assurance of their salvation. The fact that they were standing firm was evidence that their faith was genuine, not empty or superficial.

And what is the nature of the gospel that they responded to? First of all, he says it is "of first importance." That means that it is foundational, preliminary to everything else. What follows is the essential message of the gospel, the most important message the church has to proclaim. Of all the things that Paul taught those believers in Corinth about Christian life and witness, verses 3-5 are primary and indispensable.

Paul makes reference to the source of the gospel in the middle of verse 3: "...I delivered to you...what I also received..." Paul passed on only what had been passed on to him. In Galatians 1:11-12 he writes, "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." (NIV.) Paul was not the source of the gospel message, and neither was any other apostle or disciple. God himself, speaking through the Lord Jesus Christ, was the source.

JESUS CRUCIFIED, BURIED, AND RESURRECTED

Let's look at the elements of the gospel now in the rest of the sentence in verses 3-5. It has a clear literary structure. Four phrases define the gospel's content, each beginning with the word "that." First, in verse 3: "That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." When Jesus died on the cross, he dealt with the reality of our sin. By his death as a substitute in our place, he enabled us to be forgiven for our sins, to come into a relationship with God, to have a new, eternal life that starts here and now. His was a unique work of salvation. Many people were crucified on Roman crosses, but only one man voluntarily died for the sins of the world. Paul says his death was in fulfillment of the Old-Testament Scriptures. Much of the Old-Testament sacrificial system pointed to the sacrifice of Christ as our Savior. The annual day of atonement in Leviticus 16:29-34 and the messianic prophecies like Isaiah 53 anticipated Jesus as the ultimate sin-bearer.

The second element is in verse 4: "And that He was buried" By that phrase Paul is confirming the physical reality of Jesus' death. Jesus was not in a swoon when he was placed in the tomb, nor were his death and resurrection merely spiritual phenomena. The disciples placed a corpse in a tomb, and that tomb was sealed shut.

A dead body buried in a tomb prepares the way for a bodily resurrection and an empty tomb, which is the third element of the gospel in the middle of verse 4: "And that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." The God who spoke the universe into being exercised that same mighty power to accomplish the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not resurrect himself. He was raised. That's passive. The tense of the verb in Greek makes it clear that what once happened is now still in force. He is still living. The effect of his eternal life on each one of us is amazing, magnificent.

As was his death on the cross, Paul adds, his resurrection was also in fulfillment of the Old-Testament Scriptures. Jesus himself, in his own preaching ministry, made reference to one of those Old-Testament

anticipations: "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). The angels at the empty tomb reminded the women of that: "Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:6.)

C. K. Barrett summarizes these first three elements of the gospel in a wonderfully succinct way:

"Christ died, but he is not now dead. He was buried, but he is not now in the grave. He was raised, and he is now alive." (2)

The fourth element is in verse 5: "And that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." By this Paul is emphasizing the objective reality of the resurrection. He was raised, and the way we know that is that he was seen by a great number of people. Each one of these appearances substantiates that Christ indeed rose again. His resurrection means that he wasn't merely resuscitated, coming back to the life that he had before. He came back to a new kind of life, a glorified life, a categorically different life. But in the mystery of resurrection, he was the same Jesus with the same wounds on his body that those eyewitnesses to his appearances could see and touch to verify who he was.

The content of the gospel is those four basic facts. They aren't philosophical, psychological, or even doctrinal. They aren't the opinions or ideas of men about how things should have happened. They are historical realities. They can't be evaded or eliminated. These facts changed the history of the world. And our faith rests on These foundational, historical realities. The saving effect of the gospel is undermined if Jesus' resurrection is denied. That's very clear farther on in verse 17: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." The resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead is the assurance for Christians that he is still committed to us. It guarantees that his saving work on the cross was approved by God and that this salvation will never lose its effectiveness in our lives.

THE WITNESSES OF THE RESURRECTION

To strengthen his case, Paul calls a number of witnesses to the resurrection. In verse 5 he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve. Then in verses 6-7:

After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Paul mentions five individuals or groups altogether. It struck me as very touching that the first disciple who was mentioned in verse 5 was Cephas or Peter, who profanely denied his Lord publicly. The risen Lord Jesus lovingly appeared to him and folded Peter to himself. Paul mentioned the twelve at the end of verse 5. (He called the disciples "the twelve" even though there were only eleven of them before Judas Iscariot was replaced.)

In verse 6 he mentions five hundred brethren. We don't know when this happened; it's not recorded in the Biblical literature. But Paul is emphasizing the quantity of reliable witnesses who were available. He mentions James in verse 7. This is the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. James did not surrender his life to Christ as his Savior and Lord until after the resurrection, probably until this appearance of Jesus to him. The mention at the end of verse 7 of all the apostles is probably a summary statement. Over that period of forty days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, he did appear to all his disciples on different occasions.

Paul's main argument is that there were still eyewitnesses to the resurrection living at the time he was writing this first letter to the Corinthians. Paul is inviting people to check out the reality of the resurrection for themselves. He's saying, "There are nearly five hundred people who, some twenty years ago, saw Jesus after his resurrection. Ask one of them." This is very convincing proof of the resurrection, because

Paul would never have challenged people like this in a public letter that was going to be circulated if these eyewitnesses had not in reality seen the resurrected Christ. Paul was convinced that his witnesses would confirm the facts.

Notice the beautiful way Paul describes those of the original five hundred who had died in the last twenty years: "...[They] have fallen asleep...." The terror of the antagonist that none of us can withstand, Paul is saying, has become, for the Christian, nothing more than drifting off to sleep. What a tender thought.

PAUL'S WITNESS

The final witness to the resurrection is Paul himself, and he's a bit more expansive in talking about how the resurrection has changed his life. He refers to himself in two amazing ways. First, he calls himself a premature birth, and then he calls himself nothing more than a trophy of the grace of God. Let's read verses 8-9:

"And last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Paul was a hateful unbeliever, violently opposed to what God was doing through the church, until Jesus confronted him on the Damascus road (Acts 9). The phrase Paul uses, "one untimely born," was the normal phrase for an abortion, miscarriage, or premature birth-essentially a life unable to sustain itself. In carrying the idea of being unformed or dead or useless, the phrase was also a common form of derision. Paul looks back and sees that as an unbeliever before his conversion, he was spiritually unformed-dead, useless, a person to be scorned. The irony is that as an unbeliever, he was convinced that Jesus was dead. But by God's sovereign grace, the resurrected, living Christ confronted Paul and changed his life. Paul remembers how he was as an outsider, an enemy of the church of Jesus Christ, a violent persecutor, to use his own word, who deserved nothing, least of all an apostolic ministry. This is not false humility on Paul's part. Paul never could get over the fact that Christ would call him, of all people, to apostolic responsibility.

THE LIFE-CHANGING EFFECT OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Paul's personal sense of being unqualified, undeserving, and weak provided the Lord the opportunity to be his adequacy, his qualification, his strength. It was the power of the resurrection, the life-changing grace of God at work, that transformed Paul, that motivated and empowered him. He speaks of all that in verses 10-11 when he says it's all of grace.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed."

It didn't matter who preached to the Corinthians-Peter, James, or Paul himself-it was the grace of God at work. And it was the grace of God at work in the Corinthians that allowed them to respond to the gospel.

The same grace of God that was responsible for Paul's salvation was responsible for his faithfulness in ministry. The power of the resurrected Christ had brought three great changes in Paul's life. First, he had experienced a deep recognition of his own sin. For the first time he realized how far his external religious life was from being internally godly. He saw himself as he really was, as an enemy of God and a persecutor of the church. Second, he experienced a revolution in his character. From being an enemy of the church, he became her greatest defender. His life was transformed from self-righteous hatred to sacrificial love. He changed from being an oppressor to being a servant, from an imprisoner to a deliverer, from a life-taker to a life-giver, from a judge to a friend. Third, he experienced a radical redirection of his energy. He was a passionate, zealous person, and just as passionately and energetically as he had ever opposed the

family of God in Christ, he now served that family. No wonder Paul was so excited about the resurrection of Jesus Christ-it had gripped him and turned him around.

I grew up with the Easter hymn *He Lives*. It speaks of all the evidences of the resurrection, but the most telling evidence is in the line "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart."³ And that is the testimony of the apostle here: "He turned my life inside out, made it worth something, and now he's using me to his glory!" That just blew Paul's mind.

Let's go back to where we started. Are you scared to death of dying, to use my friend's phrase? Listen to Paul's words to Timothy: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). The apostle Peter says that what God has given us is "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31.) The power of God raised Christ's body from the dead, and that same power is available to deliver us who are in Christ from the grip of fear and anxiety, and to cause us to rejoice in the glorious and certain hope of what God has prepared for us in eternity. We don't have to be afraid of what comes after death.

But the resurrection also guarantees victory in our daily lives here and now. The power of the resurrection can be expressed in us as it was in Paul, in all places, under all circumstances, to the glory of God. We don't have to live with the fear of death. We can echo Paul's victorious shout at the end of our chapter in verses 54-55, quoting the Old-Testament prophets Isaiah and Hosea: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?" Then in verse 57 he responds to that miraculous truth: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." That victorious view of life and death is ours because of our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you realizing that your faith has to some degree been "in vain," that there has been a superficiality to it? Have you been in it more for what you could get out of it? You don't have to live that way. As you have probably already figured out, a little bit of God is a very unsettling way to live. There is no stability in that. The world is too slippery and seductive. But you don't have to go on that way. With the Corinthians, you can embrace the absolute reality of the resurrection of Christ as Lord of life. That's another point of the resurrection: He took our sins at the cross, and he earned the right to be the Lord of our life in the resurrection.

Or maybe you have heard all this for weeks or months or years, but you have never received the gospel, accepted Christ's forgiveness for sin, and surrendered yourself to his lordship over your life. You don't have to go on that way, either.

There's a story in Acts 16:23-34 of a frightened Roman jailer standing before Paul and Silas, thinking about his own execution because he thought he had let the prisoners escape. He said, "Sir, what must I do to be saved?" All they said was, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved...." The Christ, the Promised One of the Old Testament, Jesus, Y'shua, the Savior of the world and the Lord of life as well-believe in him, and salvation is yours. That is amplified in Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved...." Salvation can be yours right now. Accept his forgiveness for your sin, and then surrender your life to him as the risen, glorified Lord.

Notes:

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, © 1993, 1994 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 363.
2. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1966, p. 28, Harper & Row Publishers, New York.
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