**The Gospel of the Resurrection**

March 21, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Key Verse 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…”*

As we begin our preparations for Easter in earnest, we will be studying what many consider as one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible. 1 Corinthians 15’s message on the resurrection has implications on the Christian faith, human history and on our very lives. It is something too tremendous to tackle in a single sermon, so this will be the first of three sermons. Nevertheless I pray the Lord will guide us into understanding the meaning behind His greatest miracle, the resurrection, and how the Risen Jesus is our living hope.

Look at verse 1, **“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.”** Why is Paul starting off the most pivotal part of the whole letter with a reminder of the Gospel? Why is he going “back to square one” with people who are already believers? Before we go any further, let us briefly review all that we have studied so far in 1 Corinthians. In chapters 1-4, Paul dealt with challengers to his authority and deep divisions within the church. In Chapter 5, sexual immorality. In chapter 6, lawsuits among believers. In chapter 7, marriage and sexuality. Chapters 8-10, food sacrificed to idols and in last week’s passage (Chapter 11) lack of reverence in worship and in taking the Lord’s Supper.

Though the issues were varied, they all shared the same root cause; the Corinthians did not hold on to the teachings of the Gospel. Although Paul had stayed with them for a year and half, teaching everything about the Gospel of Jesus (Acts 18), it did not take long for all those teachings to go out the window once they were left to their own devices. They may have been full of spirit and eagerness in the beginning but all this faded away as they faced the everyday realities of life. It is very reminiscent of the feeling you have after being at an amazing service or church conference/retreat. It is easy to feel excited about Jesus and the Gospel when you are in such a perfect environment surrounded by fellow believers. But now, weeks later, all you feel is the monotony of life; the deadlines, bills, managing relationships, frustrations with family and friends, the constant stream of depressing news that fills whatever screen you look at... all-the-while struggling with your own sins, your fears and anxieties. However, this is exactly why we need to constantly be reminded of the Gospel; the Good News of Great Joy that gives new life to all who believe in Jesus Christ our Lord. The Gospel of Jesus restores us when we feel empty, strengthens us when we are weak and comforts us when we are in pain. The Gospel alone is the only answer to everything that ails us in life, a gift that Jesus graciously offers to us for free.

A friend of mine who I studied one of Paul’s letters with asked me, “Why does Paul say the same thing over and over again? Why is he so repetitive!?” Due to our sins, we all suffer a kind of spiritual amnesia. Even though we have received the Gospel and we have “taken our stand” on it, it is so easy to forget the goodness of God and all the ways He has enriched our lives. It’s so embarrassingly easy to the point that I personally wonder why God would ever want to be with me in the first place! Yet I am always encouraged by the sheer number of ways God expresses His longing for me, His desire for me to draw near to Him and the very lengths He went to give the gift of new life in Him in the Gospel. Which leads us into verse 2a, **“By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”** The original Greek used here is in present tense and indicates an ongoing process. As we have studied before, there are two parts to our salvation. There is our initial confession of faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour (justification) and there is the life-long process of growing in Christ’s likeness and character (sanctification). We are truly saved if we hold on to this Gospel faith, looking forward to when Jesus brings all this to completion in the Kingdom of God.

However, pay special attention to verse 2b, **“Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”** The original translation of “believing in vain” means to believe without great thought or consideration. Contrary to popular belief, Christianity has a rich and robust tradition of thought and intellectual reasoning. Even Jesus Himself urged His disciples to carefully consider the cost of following Him in Luke 14:25-34. We are not called to simply believe out of blind faith. Instead, like any good student, thinker or lawyer, we need to carefully examine the evidence and see if what Paul says about Jesus and what Jesus says about Himself truly match the facts.

Now, let us read the key verses for this passage, “**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…**” If you are to remember one thing about the whole Bible, it is these verses right here. Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead. More than being of first importance, it is of ultimate importance!

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. In Genesis 1-3, we witness how God speaks the universe into existence, culminating in the creation of man and woman who bear His image, are filled with the breath of life, given purpose in taking care of God’s creations and enjoy ultimate fellowship with Him in the Garden of Eden. Tragically, because of mankind’s desire to be equal with God and choosing what is right and wrong for themselves, sin and death entered into the world. The world has been in ruin ever since. Mankind could no longer enjoy the presence of God as they once did and were doomed to all face death. Yet God did not abandon us. Instead, He promised to send someone who would triumph where Adam and Eve had failed (Genesis 3:15). The entire Old Testament is the account of God bringing about this promise through His chosen people, Israel. God sent his one and only Son, Jesus to come not as an earthly king but as a suffering Messiah, dying for the sins of all humanity (Isaiah 53, Psalm 22).

If the story ended here, it would have been another tragic tale of a spiritual leader running afoul of a powerful institution and his entire movement crushed until nothing was left to speak of. But there is one major difference. Even after He was provenly executed and securely buried, three days later the tomb was found empty and there was Jesus… live and in the flesh, His resurrected body containing all the marks of crucifixion to prove it! This is the key point that separates Christianity from all other religions. It is not just the sayings of a god or teacher. It isn’t secret knowledge or a hidden mystery. Rather, it’s a historical fact of the only resurrection to ever happen as proof of His triumph over sin and death. It is not just a claim; it’s a stone-cold fact. In fact, it is the most scrutinized and written-about fact in human history because the implications of this are literally world-changing.

However, for the Risen Jesus to be a fact, you need more than just evidence. You also need eyewitnesses to back it up. Look at verse 5, **“and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”** Cephas is the Greek form of Peter. Peter was Jesus’ top disciple. He boasted that he would follow Jesus even in death and would never betray Him. Regrettably, when Jesus was arrested and crucified, the accusation of a little servant girl was enough for Peter to completely disown Jesus. At the most crucial moment, he utterly failed Jesus. Yet the Risen Jesus appeared before him and in spite of what any ordinary person would consider an unforgivable betrayal, Jesus forgave him, reinstated him and gave him the task of leading the church. Because of the Risen Jesus, we later see Peter preaching boldly before even the Sanhedrin (the highest authority in the land), enduring whippings and imprisonment for the sake of the Gospel (Acts 4:1-22 & 5:17-42). The same could be said for the other disciples who lived in fear in the days after Jesus’ crucifixion but after being visited by the Risen Jesus, courageously went out to spread the Gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Every one of them went through incredible hardships to share the Gospel and every one of them died a martyr’s death, yet every one of them went to their deaths exclaiming “He has risen! Jesus has risen!” No one would go that far for the sake of a lie. No human being can have their entire character, their worldview and their life transformed so dramatically unless they truly had a transcendent experience with the Risen Jesus.

Look at verse 6, **“After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”** While a skeptic can dismiss Jesus appearing to the disciples as them fabricating a lie, it becomes much harder to dismiss Jesus appearing before so many people at the same time. The fact that Paul points out that most of them were still alive at the time of his writing meant that anyone could simply go and verify the claim for themselves. You would never include such a detail because it would be so easy to disprove the story. Anyone who has ever tried to invent a story (or lie) with a group of friends knows that the more people you include, the harder it is to keep the same story. All the details start to change and the story/lie soon falls apart. Yet all these people had the exact same story; “Jesus has risen!” Building on this, Paul says in verse 7, **“Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles…”** The “James” mentioned here is most likely Jesus’ half-brother. Even though he was family and saw Jesus’ ministry up-close, James did not believe Jesus. He and his family thought Jesus was crazy (Mark 3:21). But through encountering the Risen Jesus, James came to believe in Him so much that James became the head of the Jerusalem church. His faith and righteousness was so great that even the non-believing Jews referred to him as “James the Just” or “James the Righteousness.” Yet he too was killed by the Pharisees when he refused to deny his faith in Jesus. He was thrown off a high tower and stoned to death yet even as he was being stoned, he got on his knees and prayed for them saying, *“I beg of you, Lord God our Father, forgive them! They do not know what they are doing.”* James could live and die in a Christ-like way because he met the Risen Christ.

Now the skeptic may come back again and say, “O.K. You may have all these witnesses but all of them had close ties to Jesus. They clearly had a vested interest in Jesus being alive so they must all be biased! If this were a court, none of their testimony would be valid.” Which is why Paul, an expert in the law, saves the best for last in verse 8, **“and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”** Before he met the Risen Jesus, Paul had a different name, Saul, meaning “the greatest”. He was a devoted Pharisee. Saul’s zeal for his faith was so great he took it upon himself to go out and persecute Christians wherever he could find them. He was an absolute enemy of Christ. In no way can the church’s greatest enemy became its greatest preacher unless he truly met and was transformed by the Risen Jesus. Paul was very aware of that, so much so that he wrote, **“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. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me”** (verses 9-10). The Risen Jesus used Paul as His apostle to the Gentiles, enabled him to travel on mission trips all over the Roman world, build churches, write about half the New Testament and influence the world like few people ever have in all of human history. Instead of Paul seeing his accomplishments as the work of his own blood, sweat and tears, he credits it purely as God’s grace upon him and gives all glory to Jesus Christ.

For most of my life I tried everything in my power to be righteous. I wanted to prove to God that I was a worthy Christian. But so many failures, from love, to school, to life in general brought me to the brink of despair. It took personally meeting the Risen Jesus through Romans 5:6-8 for me to start seeing Him as He truly is. And it would be His continuous grace that would see me through so many trials ahead like unemployment, the death of a loved one and most recently, marrying by faith (I was deathly afraid of that too). In all these instances, God has shown me that resurrection hope is not just spiritual mumbo-jumbo or a vague promise of future happiness. It gives me hope in the here and now. It reminds me that God is my provider whenever I worry over finances. It reminds me that God is my protector as I go out to work every day during Covid. And it reminds me that God is my counsellor as Emerald and I navigate the ups-and-downs of marriage with all the challenges involved.

Lastly, Jesus has made us eyewitnesses of His grace and mercy to the whole world. Each one of us has a testimony to share. Hence, I pray the Lord will let the power of His resurrection continue to give us life. Let it shape us, change us and transform us to become more like Him. Let it fill us with boldness to go forth and preach His Name to the many who desperately need to hear it and be saved. Finally, let it enrich us with a hope in Him that never fails, a hope that lets us live devotedly to Him, both now and forever.

**BIG IDEA**: Be Transformed By the Risen Christ