

HE IS ALIVE!

1 Corinthians 15:1–19

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1 Corinthians 15:1–19 (NIV)

“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 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, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 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. Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your

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faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

We’ve been looking at 1 Corinthians now for over a year. I must be frank to tell you that if the Corinthian church had extended to me an invitation to be its pastor I would have respectfully declined the invitation. It was a “problem” church. Divisions, extremes in the church between the legalists on one hand and the libertines on the other hand, flagrant misuse of spiritual gifts, disorder in worship. Even now as we see in 1 Corinthians 15 denial of a basic tenant of the Christian faith—resurrection of the body.

But because of their problems we have this letter and if they had not had their problems we would not have had this fantastic letter. If there had not been some in the church denying the reality of the resurrection of the body we would not have had 1 Corinthians 15 which I have found that when Christians pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I don’t know of any part of Scripture that we can find more solace and comfort in than what is written here.

It is not enough to ever say “That person or that church has a problem,” then stop and put the period at the end of the sentence. It must always be said when describing someone or some church with a problem, “That person or that church has a problem God is working through, working in, triumphing over.” Our problems, if we would allow them to be, can become great opportunities for God to work whether that is true in our personal life or in the church at large. God is at work in our problems.

The verses before us today set before us first the presence of the gospel in our lives, the presence of the good news of Jesus Christ among us. Paul says four things about the presence of the gospel to us and to the Corinthians.

I. First, the good news is something we receive.

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He had to remind the Corinthians of this, because they were prone to invent their own doctrine and Paul had to remind them, as all Christians must be, that what we believe as Christians is not subject to the special insight or wisdom of a particular person or congregation, but that what we have is the gospel as it has been handed to us. It is not our own invention. It has been given to the apostles. It has been given through the Scriptures. It has, in turn, been communicated to us by word of mouth by those whom the Lord has found trustworthy. Therefore, the church is not ours, the gospel is not ours, it is something that we have received and comes from the Lord and from His people.

II. The second thing Paul says about the good news is that the good news is something in which we stand.

“I remind you,” he says, “of the gospel which I preached to you which you received and on which you’ve taken your stand” (1 Corinthians 15:1). That to me says that the good news of Jesus Christ brings stability to our lives. There’s a lot of slipping sand, a lot of quicksand in our life. But being in Jesus Christ puts us on solid ground.

We live in a dangerous world, but we stand in Christ. I have never been able to be part of that segment of the body of Christ which, I believe, says this out of good motivation—but I think it is wrong, wrong, a million times wrong. The view of the future that sees it as something which should terrorize Christians, pulverize them with the fear of some impending collapse that is on the horizon. Friends, our security is not based on the political scene. It’s not based on who’s next elected as president. It’s not based upon the economic order. Our stability is in Jesus Christ and nothing else. In Christ we stand in a dangerous time. We can stand. If our political freedom is taken, Christ cannot be taken from us. If the economy falls, Christ will not fall away from us.

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Why, then, should we become so absorbed in the passing and fail to realize our place in the permanent?

This is a seducing time. But in Christ, we have a place to stand. This is a hurting time, but in the midst of our hurts, we can stand in Christ.

I was in a place of business this week, talking to a young woman who was assisting me. I happened to see the beautiful wedding band she had on her hand and I commented to her on its uniqueness and beauty. She looked at it, acknowledged the compliment, and turned her hand over and said, “But it has a crack in it. And right now, it’s symbolic of our marriage. We are separated.” I thought, “There are so many people who bear that testimony today.” Somehow, I know, from those of you who are going through this experience, that in Christ you have a place to stand. When life is cracking and you feel cracked, in Christ we stand.

This is the good news in which we stand. We have received it, we stand in it.

III. Paul goes on to say that this good news is something by which we are being saved.

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves us. Often, the verb that is used of the word “to save” in the New Testament is used in the past tense—“We *were* saved.” It is used in the future tense—“We *shall be* saved.” Here, it is being used in the present tense—“We *are being* saved.” Right now, we are being saved.

What are we being saved from? We’re being saved from death, unto life. We’re not headed toward the grave as an ultimate destination. The principle of life in Jesus Christ is at work in our mortal bodies. We are being saved from the dominion of Satan, to the dominion of Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords and King of kings. We’re being saved from sin unto righteousness. That process is at work in us now.

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IV. Paul tells us, fourthly, that the presence of the good news is something which must be tenaciously held to.

“If you hold firmly to the word I’ve preached to you” (1 Corinthians 15:2). He’s conscious of the fact that there are Christians who have a very weak grasp and hold upon Jesus Christ. His grasp on them may be tight, but their grasp on Him needs to become tighter. I liken what Paul is saying here to grabbing hold of a live electrical wire with a lot of voltage. When I get a hold of that wire, I not only have a hold on it, but it has a hold on me. Only, with a live electrical wire, it is to my disadvantage to have such. But Jesus comes, not to electrocute us, but to charge us with His presence. When He has a hold on us, we have a hold on Him. This is the presence of the good news, what is done in our life.

Paul goes on to articulate, in verses 3–11, the elements of the good news. The things that are of first importance, that is, the elemental realities of what the gospel consists of. He defines Christianity in just three or four statements. Here is where the apostle is at work, defining the basic elements of the gospel.

The first element is this: according to the Scripture, Christ died for our sins. It’s not sufficient to say, “Christ died.” If that’s all we can say about Jesus, then we can’t say anything more about Him than we can say about any other person. “So and so died.” But Christ didn’t just die. He is the only one that died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.

The phrase “according to the Scriptures” means that the death of Jesus is no accident, no reckless martyrdom. It is foretold. Isaiah had seen it eight hundred years before, “He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquity. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him and by his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). There’s a transfer of our sins to Christ. His

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death means our sin can be atoned for, it can be done away with. We can be made one with God, which is the root meaning of “atonement,” “at one with God,” through Jesus Christ.

Not only that, Christ was buried. This is important, especially in the New Testament era, there are some today who believe that Jesus didn’t actually die on the cross. The point is that the burial confirms the reality of His death. He was dead and buried. You don’t bury people who are still breathing. He is buried. The reality of His burial confirms His death and the reality of His burial also means that the resurrection occurred to a corpse; not the reanimation of someone who was in a coma—He was dead and buried.

The third element of the gospel is that Christ was raised on the third day, according to the Scripture. Death did not put an end to Him. He rose according to the Scripture. It was David who said, in Psalm 16:10, of the Messiah, speaking to the Father, “You will not abandon Me to the grave, nor will You let Your holy one see decay.” Peter quotes this on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. This is the Old Testament looking forward to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He rose. Our whole faith is built upon that.

William Barclay points out that the resurrection of Jesus bears witness to these realities. Truth is stronger than falsehood. Good is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hatred. And life is stronger than death. If Jesus has not raised, then all of those get reversed. Falsehood is stronger than truth, evil is stronger than good, hatred is stronger than love, and death is stronger than life. But Jesus comes to make a radical difference in the equation that we look at when we speak of life. He rose.

I want to take an additional moment to thread these three things together, that Jesus died for our sins, that He was buried, and that He rose again from the dead. My sins are upon me. I bear them. When Christ died, the load of my sin was transferred to Him. I am now free. The load is

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upon Him. But then, a marvelous thing happens. When Christ rises from the dead, it is not described that He rose with our sins. Our sins are now hidden from view. Our sins are in the grave. They're in the cross with Christ. They're swallowed up in His death. When Jesus ascends to the Father in heaven, my sins did not rise with Him, they still remained in the tomb. When Jesus ascends to God, my sins are not in His hands—the scars are there, but the sins are not. They are removed. As far as the heavens are from the earth, so far He has removed my transgressions and your transgressions from Him.

Therefore, what a wonderful salvation. If anyone were to be kept out of heaven because of my sins, it would have to be Jesus, because my sins were placed upon Him. But my sins cannot keep Him out, for He is there already. He is there. He rose. He bore my sins. He took my sins and buried them, and He rose. And He is at the right hand of God the Father. The resurrection is proof that God is satisfied with the person and the work of Jesus.

The fourth essential element of the gospel that Paul states here. He appeared to Peter. And by the way, this is not an all-inclusive list, but a representative list here in 1 Corinthians 15. He appeared to Peter. He appeared to the Twelve, the company of apostles. He appeared to five hundred. That is, all of those who'd come to faith in Christ prior to His ascension. He appeared to James. James here is most probably the brother of the Lord, rather than the apostle James. He is the one who, in Mark 3:21, said with the other members of Jesus' earthly family, "He is beside himself." This is the one of whom John 7:5 says, "Even His own brothers did not believe in Him." But James had come to believe. James was given an appearance. Then, there was an appearance to Paul. It's striking that out of these five appearances which Paul names, there are three to individuals—Peter, James and Paul are to individuals who had, in one way or another,

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miserably failed Christ and doubted Him, and were not worthy of His grace. But the marvel of Jesus Christ is that He extends His grace to the unworthy.

Paul says “Last of all, He appeared to me as one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:8). The meaning of this phrase “abnormally born” is that Paul was born as a Christian and as an apostle, without a normal period of gestation. The other apostles had accompanied Jesus for three years. They had been in the womb of His life and ministry, death and resurrection. They had had a three-year incubation period. But Paul had no such time. His encounter with Jesus was limited to the noontime experience on the road to Damascus, where he saw him face to face. He therefore says, “I am one abnormally born.” In the Greek language, It’s the word which is used to describe a fetus that is delivered unformed, underdeveloped, repulsive, and probably lifeless. No doubt a term that Paul’s critics used of him in the church. If there had been a biography written of Paul’s life in the first century, it would not have been titled *Born Again*. It would be *The Miscarriage*, *The Aborted One*. That’s exactly what Paul is getting at here. Last of all, me—the abortion. His birth was precipitous and unexpected. This had resulted in two responses in his life, which should be always in our lives as Christians—Paul is a model for us here—there is a sense of unworthiness and yet a sense of worthiness. He tells us of his feeling of unworthiness, when he says, “I am the least of all apostles and don’t deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9). The deep recognition of the stain of sin before he had become a Christian. Humility, a sense that “I really don’t belong in this forgiven company.” It brought him the sense of worthiness. “By the grace of God I am what I am. His grace to me was not without effect” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul didn’t spend the rest of his Christian life groveling in worm-like humility. “I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing.” Some people grovel in nothingness. Jesus doesn’t say this to be nothing. He says this in order that we can

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serve Him. God's grace upon us. By the grace of God, I am what I am. We recognize the marvelous work which God had allowed him to accomplish.

In verse 11, he comes back to the point. He digressed about his own being born into the kingdom. He comes back to the point in verse 11 and says, "Remember the essential is that he appeared to many." Whether it was the other apostles or it was me, the fact remains that the message is the same. Jesus has risen and the result is the same—you are saved from your sins. There is no Christianity without this affirmation—and so we believe. We believe the elements of the gospel.

In verses 12–19 Paul goes on to give us the consequences of the good news if the gospel is false. The Corinthian Christians were probably not denying Christ's resurrection. What they were denying was their own resurrection and possibility of the resurrection of the Christians who had already fallen asleep and been buried. Why they were doing this is probably attributable to the Greek culture from which they came. The Greeks didn't think that the body would ever be incorporated in anything eternal. It was purely a temporary mode of existence. The spirit would go on living, but the body wouldn't be incorporated in the afterlife. They simply took their pagan ideas, their pre-Christian ideas, and began introducing them into the church. Paul here has to sit upon that view and says, simply, "if the resurrection does not occur for us, it never occurred for Christ. And if the resurrection never occurred for Christ, there are consequences" and Paul lists those consequences.

The first consequence of Christ not being raised from the dead is that our preaching is useless—it's like beating the air, the preaching is useless. Paul doesn't so much mean the form or mode of preaching, but the content of the preaching, what we preach. The content of what we say is useless. It is vain.

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Secondly, our faith is empty. What we believe is devoid of all content. It's been robbed of everything that fills it. It's empty.

Not only that, but the apostles are liars. And beyond being liars, they're false witnesses of God. Lying has come to be, in our time, a very prevalent sort of thing. Lies are told everyday. Every time we turn on a television or radio, listen to a commercial, most of the time we're listening to a lie or a camouflaged PR statement of a lie. So we've sort of gotten used to lying in our culture. You may have found this—that the mouthwash you are using did not produce the anticipated social results you had envisioned. Lying.

For a Jewish rabbi in the first century, to think of misrepresenting God was an unthinkable thought. It could only represent the highest sin, the sin of idolatry. So when Paul says, "We would be found misrepresenting God," he's not speaking of a Madison Avenue PR-type. He is speaking as a man who knows what it's like in the Old Testament to be accused of being a false witness of God.

So he recognizes the heavy consequences. "The apostles are all liars if Christ is not risen." Not only that...

The fourth consequence, "our sins are unatoned for." We still are in bondage to the guilt of our sins. Sin is still loaded upon us.

Fifth, our departed Christian loved ones are lost. All this talk at the graveside about awaiting the resurrection is a whole lot of hokum. All this comfort which has been extended Christians in a time of bereavement is just so much psychological self-deceit. If Christ did not rise, those who have died in Christ are lost. There is nothing coming beyond that grave.

The sixth consequence is, if Christ is not raised, then our faith in Christ is pitiable. "We of all men are most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Here Paul is thinking of the fact that the

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Christian must be looked upon as slightly touched, a person who's given to believing fables as reality, a person to whom, therefore, pity should be extended because of the weakness of their mind. Of all men, most to be pitied. I've heard people say, and I've said it myself, "If Jesus didn't rise again from the dead, the Christian life would still be worth living, because it's given us such a marvelous ethic and way of relating to other people. If this life were the only life and there was no afterlife, it would still be worth being a Christian." Paul's a lot more hard nosed than I am on this matter. His one-word reply to that whole line is, "Baloney!" He does not say, "If Christ has not risen from the dead, go ahead and be a Christian anyway because it'll do marvelous things for you here and now." He says, "If Christ hasn't risen from the dead, we're of all men most to be pitied, that we gave our lives and efforts—getting involved in something that was so patently based upon a fraud. If we had any concern at all for the truth and morality and righteousness, we'd have never followed fraud, such as would be perpetrated in a hoax that Jesus has risen from the dead. We are to be pitied more than all men." There is no Christian life without the Resurrection, is what Paul's saying. "Throw the whole thing overboard if the Resurrection didn't occur."

Karl Barth said, "Someday, a company of men will proceed out to a churchyard and lower a coffin and everyone will go home but one, who will not come back, and that will be me." I think of that as I go to gravesides. Someday, a company of men will go out to the churchyard and lower a coffin and everyone will go home except one, and that will be me. That's the story of all of us, if Christ doesn't return in our lifetime.

But that's not the end of the story. Even if we die, if we die in Christ, that grave is not our resting place. "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8).

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It was on September 12th or 13th, 1759, that a significant piece of history took place on the North American continent, the Battle of Quebec. British General Thomas Wolff had surrounded Quebec with superior forces. Quebec was defended by General Montcalm. The night before the battle, General Wolff paced out under the evening stars, contemplating his life and the battle which would come the next day. In his mind came the poem which had been written only eight years before in a Country Churchyard—Thomas Gray’s Elogy. The poem’s theme is the common fate of common people, simple people who live out their lives and die unnoticed and unremembered. The poem includes this famous line “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” Wolff was contemplating what would happen the next day, that soldiers in his command might die, that he himself might die. The paths of glory lead but to the grave. No matter what happened that next day in battle, the paths of glory, for some, would lead to the grave. The next day came, and the British won that day. Wolff, the British general, lost his life. Montcalm, the French general, lost his life on the same day. The paths of glory, in Thomas Gray’s words, lead but to the grave.

That is true of every individual on this earth, if the resurrection of Christ is not a reality. The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Christ has come and He’s made it possible for us to change one word in the phrase, a preposition. It makes all the difference in the world. It’s the whole point Paul’s driving at. The paths of glory lead but from the grave.

Closing Prayer

We remember Your words today, Lord Jesus. “I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in Me though he were dead yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25–26). Then, Lord, we remember Your turning to Martha, “Do you believe this?” We hear You turning to us anew today, and saying to us, as You recite in our midst, “I am the

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resurrection and the life.” We hear You turning once more to us. And saying to us, “Do you believe this?” Lord, I pray that every person in here would be able to say to You, “Yes.” And I pray that it would be more than an intellectual kind of thing. Believing in Your resurrection would cause the difference to be made in our everyday lives, when it looks like death is upon us, or whether it would be the death of some dream or the death of some relationship or the death of some cherished idea or the death of us in an economic sense. That we will remember that we are Yours, and life is stronger than death and Your love is stronger than hatred. Good is stronger than evil and truth is stronger than falsehood. May we be hidden in You, in Your Resurrection life. We are a Resurrection people, Lord, because of You. We give You praise. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.