

**THE GREATEST MESSAGE**  
**1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11**

What's your most important possession? (Not your most important person, but *possession*.)

You might say, "My cash/wealth," or "My job" (no cash without some kind of job), or "my car" (have to get to work somehow) or "my house," or "my special collection — wedding pictures, art, stamps, baseball cards, coins, books, etc..."

My most important possession is my wedding ring. It's a simple gold band, nothing particularly unique about it; it might be worth a couple hundred dollars or so. The value of this ring, however, is not in its intrinsic value, but in what it represents. This ring provides the motive for why I go to work each day. It guides my schedule and informs the choices I make with my time — why I don't work late without calling and pay bills or mow the lawn in the evening instead of watching baseball or reading all night long. It directs my relationships — some I won't have because of it (with other women) and some I do have because of it (with my children and other married couples). This ring represents the source of all my greatest earthly joys.

The value of my wedding band is not the gold in it; the value of my band is the relationship with Raye Jeanne that it represents. And that value was not only significant to me on my wedding day, but is valuable to me every single day of my life. It informs and guides everything I do.

There is a similar possession we have as believers in Christ. We tend to think of it as something that while good, is no longer particularly needed to us. Like a classic car, we pull it out periodically and look at it — maybe shining it up or taking it for a drive or showing it to a friend — but it is not something that we think is of particular importance to us day by day. I'm speaking of the gospel and the truth of Christ's resurrection.

Like our wedding band on our wedding day, we know that we need the gospel for our salvation. It is what begins our lives with Christ. But we are prone to forgetting about its importance after our salvation or after Easter Sunday. The gospel and resurrection are important today. And tomorrow. And next week...

Paul says the gospel of first importance. It's primary. It's fundamental. You need the gospel. The true gospel is no more a one-time event than a true marriage is a one-day event. The gospel is *most* important. Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 15 —

**THE GREATEST NEED FOR EVERY PERSON IS TO BELIEVE THAT CHRIST DIED AND WAS RESURRECTED FOR THEIR SINS.**

This morning, as we look at the opening section to the longest section on the resurrection in Scripture, we will observe **three reasons** to believe the gospel and the resurrection —

## 1. Believe the Gospel Because It is Your **LIFE** (vv. 1-2)

- Notice the four words Paul uses to indicate the benefit of the gospel for his readers —
  - ✓ **you received** — in this context it means to accept something as authoritative and believe it.
    - Not only did they receive this gospel from Paul when he preached to them, but he had **also received it** (v. 3) — and he had received it directly from Christ (Gal. 1:11-12, 16).
    - That is, what Paul preached was not his own creation — it was not man’s creation. It was not up to him to invent, transform, expand or improve it. No new and improved gospel is needed. The good news of the gospel is unchanging from beginning to end. What saved Paul and that Corinthians is what will save us and our great grandchildren — and anyone who believes.
    - The task of the believer in Christ is not to make the gospel “new and improved.” It’s not a box of soap, a candy bar or a mouse trap. It is the gospel of God. It doesn’t need changing. It needs to be believed.
    - We do well to heed the warning of the early Church father, Augustine: “If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.”
  - ✓ **you stand** — the gospel is the foundation and bedrock of their lives. They are immovable from it and they are always dependent upon it, from the point of salvation forward (pfct tense). It has been and continues to be their sole source of stability in a difficult world.
  - ✓ **you are saved** — not “were saved,” but **are saved** — presently and continually. There is a present reality to salvation; God is continually demonstrating His saving work. We are not saved one time only, but we were saved one day and that salvation will continue thru eternity.
  - ✓ **you hold fast** — Paul assumes that they are holding fast (“since you hold...”; see **11:2**), but there are those who do not hold fast, and their lack of faith proves to be **vain** and lifeless.
    - When people do not continue with Christ it does not mean they lose their salvation, but is an indication that they did not have it (**1 Jn. 2:19**).
    - When people don’t continue believing in and living for Jesus, it proves the “belief” they had was vain — it was empty, it wasn’t genuine. There is no value in saying you believe in Jesus if you don’t live for Him or love Him more than everything else. It’s like an empty treasure chest.
- All these verbs make us aware of the reality that the gospel is not an addendum to life; it *is* our life. We have nothing else greater for which we might live — it’s why Paul says that living is Christ and Christ is our life. Nothing surpasses Him — not cooking, baseball, a new house, a new job, or the Presidency.
- We might say it this way — Get a life. Get the gospel. Do you believe? Is Christ your life?

## 2. Believe the Gospel Because it is **REDEMPITIVE** (vv. 3-8)

- What is **first** in order of priority (**importance**) is the gospel. Nothing takes its place.
  - ✓ Since the gospel is of **first importance**, it is first for all people — believer & unbeliever alike.
  - ✓ If the gospel and Christ are part of your life, it must be the first place. Christ won't take the second place (because He and the Triune God are ultimate and supreme). You can't be apathetic about the gospel and Christ. Trust in Christ is either first in your life or it is nothing in your life.

"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important." [C. S. Lewis]

"The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history, it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it." [Jerry Bridges]

- What is this gospel? Paul identifies it in four simple statements. With these statements, Paul tells us that the gospel looks back to a real event with a real individual to accomplish a real purpose.
  - ✓ **Christ died** — He died a genuine, historically verified death. This was no "soul sleep" or "swoon." And **Christ died for our sins** — the little preposition "for" is critical. It means that Christ died in our place and in our stead. It means that He absorbed the wrath of God instead of us.
    - He didn't just die — He died (by choice and volition) for sins — for our sins. And our sin is our transgression of God's law and our rebellious missing the mark of God's standard of holiness that all people must have to be pleasing to God.
    - Our sin comes attached with a penalty (death; see Gen. 3) and in great grace, Christ did for us what we could never do. He died instead of us and appeased God's wrath against us.
    - Jesus did not die as an example for us — He died instead of us. Cf. Rom. 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21.
    - What was transferred to Christ on the cross were all the legal consequences of our sins. And what we received from Him is the righteous standing that He has before God.
    - Imagine the day that Christ was crucified. There were three crosses for three criminals. A man named Barabbas was supposed to be on the third cross. Yet he avoided that cross. Though he had been found guilty by the Roman court, he was released and Christ was crucified in his place — Christ whom Pilate repeatedly said, "I find no fault in Him." Now if Barabbas had wandered to Golgotha that Friday afternoon, he could have looked at the cross that was designed for him and said, "There hangs Another in the place that was rightly mine. I was judged guilty, and yet He is there instead of me." Barabbas was not freed because he was innocent; he was freed because Another took his place. [Pentecost]

- Friend, “you can stand at the foot of the cross as darkness descends over Calvary’s brow, and you can look up to the One hanging on the middle cross and say, “That is the cross prepared for me. God rightly judged me as a sinner...but I go free because Another hangs there for me. He gave Himself for my benefit; He gave Himself in my place. He is my substitute.” [Pentecost]
- Substitution means that a real debt was paid. Sin is not overlooked. It is considered righteously and fully — and God poured out all His wrath against (*my*) sin on Christ.
- You might object to God’s wrath against Christ. But if there is no substitution then the only payment that can be made is by me. And if I attempt to pay for my infinite sin, it will take all of eternity and I will never be able to pay for it. God can never be satisfied for any sin payment except by a perfect sacrifice. My only hope is substitution. And it really happened!
- Notice also that Christ died for our sins **according to the Scriptures**. That is, the OT had demanded that there be payment for sin — and annually that payment was made on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). But bulls and goats can’t die in the place of men; so the OT also anticipated a “Suffering Servant” who would die for men’s sins — Jesus (Is. 53:10-12).
- ✓ **He was buried** — Christ’s real death was evidenced by a genuine, literal physical burial (like all men).
  - And His death and burial were attested to by many (the Centurion, Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate, the women at the tomb, the soldiers at the tomb, and the chief priests and Pharisees; Lk. 23).
  - And attempts were made to secure His burial to make sure His body was not stolen (Mt. 27:62ff). His death was “typical” in that He was buried; what follows was not typical.
- ✓ **He was raised** — not only was He raised, but He continues in that raised state (pfct. tense).
  - He was raised and He is alive forever more.
  - He was raised to life by the *Father* (Rom. 6:4). And the *Spirit* (Rom. 8:11). And by *Himself*: the eternally self-existent, uncreated second person of the Trinity gave life to Himself (Jn. 10:18).
  - And He was raised on the **third day**, which was important because it was what He had prophesied and if He had been raised any other day, He would have been a false prophet.
  - And He was raised **according to the Scriptures** — prob. a reference to a passage like Ps. 16:10.
  - *This* is the message that the disciples took and the church and we then take to the world.
  - This is the power and hope behind the simple resurrection narratives we read this morning.
  - “The great weapon with which the disciples of Jesus set out to conquer the world was not a mere comprehension of eternal principles; it was not an historical message, and account of something that had recently happened, it was the message, ‘He is risen.’” [Machen]
  - “If you ask where God’s glory is most seen, I will not point to creation, nor to providence, but to the raising of Jesus from the dead.” [Spurgeon]

- ✓ How do we know He was resurrected? **He appeared**. The appearances of Christ were not only an encouragement, they were more than was required in a court of law to offer legal testimony to the truthfulness of an event. To whom did He appear?
  - **Peter** (v. 5) — a private meeting at which Peter was evidently reconciled to Christ for his denial of Christ on Friday night (Mk. 16:7; Lk. 24:34). Peter had forsaken Christ but Christ did not forsake him. [MacArthur]
  - **The Twelve** (v. 5) — most notably in the Upper Room (Jn. 20:19ff), allaying their doubts.
  - **More than 500 at one time** (v. 6) — we don't know the event, but it may have been at the great commissioning in Mt. 28:16ff — the point is that many still were alive and could be questioned.
  - **James** (v. 7), the half-brother of Jesus who until the resurrection was a skeptic (Jn. 7:5) and after the resurrection became the leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13)
  - **All the apostles** (v. 7) is probably a reference to the Eleven plus James and perhaps Matthias. It is probably when they gathered for the ascension in Acts 1.
  - **Last of all...to me also** = The last of the apostles was Paul — and Christ also appeared to him (Acts 9, Damascus Road).
  - The point of all these appearances is a massive affirmation of the reality of His resurrection. It was no vision, no dream, no perception. He visibly appeared to a great many people. “Just ask.”
  - And, the appearances and testimonies (vv. 5ff) affirm the historicity of the event. No one dies for a lie — and certainly hundreds don't! Jesus genuinely died, was buried, and resurrected!
- ✓ All these events — death, burial, resurrection, and appearances all point to a physical reality with massive spiritual implications. Without the historical events of the gospel, there is no good news:
  - If Christ did not die, then he could not endure the wrath of God on our behalf.
  - If Christ did not die, He could not be buried and if Christ was not buried, He could not be resurrected and neither can we (v. 15)
  - If Christ is not resurrected then we cannot have a future with God and we are utterly hopeless.
  - If Christ did not die, was buried and resurrected, then our “gospel” and “faith” is just as empty and void of hopefulness as every other religion on earth (v. 17).
  - Paul's comment is that without that bloody cross, not only is there no salvation, but there is no value in even following Christ on this earth (v. 20).
- The gospel is not a feel good story — it is based in actual events in history. Our life depends on it.
- Do you believe? If so? Give thanks for what Christ did for you when He died and was resurrected.
- If you do not believe, as Jesus said to Nicodemus — “you must be born again.” You must believe.
- ✓ You must believe you are a sinner whose sin deserves a payment you can't make.

- ✓ You must further believe you cannot change yourself from sinner to “saint.” So you must repent of your sin, which means to ask for God’s grace to both forgive you and change you.
- ✓ You must believe that only Christ dying for your sin will satisfy God — you must trust Christ’s work on the cross for you. And you must trust that Christ is worth living for — that He is your life.
- ✓ Do you believe? Will you believe? You must believe. (Please ask if you need help believing...)
- What is important is not merely that Christ died, but that when he died, something was actually accomplished — the debt of our sin was removed from us. And His resurrection demonstrates that God was satisfied by that payment and His appearances confirm the reality of both the death and resurrection.

### 3. Believe the Gospel Because it is GRACE (vv. 9-11)

- Paul said he was the *least of the apostles* because he had *persecuted the church*. He loved the Law and loved His self-righteousness (Phil. 3:4-6), but he hated Christ. He did not want Christ.
- And then God intervened and gave him *grace* (v. 10). And the self-righteous Paul became the apostle Paul, church planter, and defender of and martyr for Christ.
- Everything Paul did was because of *grace* (3x) — God giving him undeserved opportunities.
- That was also true of Peter, James, the Twelve, the 500, and us. We have received unimaginable quantities of grace through the resurrection.
- And that is the message that Paul and the others *preach* (continually) and what Corinth *believed*.
- It is what *we* preach; it is what *we* believe. We have nothing else than the gracious resurrection message.

**CONCLUSION:** The question, “What is the gospel?” gets many kinds of answers —

- ✓ Bob Wilkin: “Doctrinal legalists [believe that]...to be born again one must believe that Jesus is God, that He died on the cross for our sins, that He rose bodily from the dead, and that by faith in Jesus and in those doctrines we have everlasting life. But the Lord Jesus never said that in order to be born again one must believe in His deity, His death, or His resurrection. The Lord Jesus simply called for faith in Himself.” [“Grace in Focus,” Nov-Dec, 2008, p. 2.]
- ✓ [Zane Hodges](#): “In recent years I have become aware of a way of presenting the gospel invitation that troubles me...I have heard people say this: ‘In order to be saved you must believe that Jesus died on the cross.’...Whenever I hear that nowadays, I get extremely uncomfortable.”

Paul’s answer is infinitely greater (and perfectly true): “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...” (1 Cor. 15:3-5). He is risen. He is risen, indeed. He and the good news (gospel) of His resurrection is the greatest possession we have. Do you believe?