

2022-02-06 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“Of first importance...”

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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. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 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. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

9 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.

10 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. 11 Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

A. Introduction

Do you ever need reminding of something? Maybe it's a big anniversary coming up, or an amazing holiday that had slipped your mind, or a promise you had made to a friend. All important things, but there is something even more important that Paul wanted to remind his Corinthian readers of. Paul wanted to remind them of the gospel – the good news that he had preached to them, because it is of utmost importance and its consequences of monumental significance.

So what is the gospel, the 'good news' of Christianity? In essence it is a glorious message of salvation, rescue, deliverance, healing – all interconnected words and concepts. It is focussed on the individual but cosmic in its scope. This sermon, looking at 11 verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, looks at the gospel in two ways. The first is how the 'how' and the second is the 'what'. How the gospel works, and that is focussed on us, and what it is built upon, and that is focussed on Christ.

B. The gospel process (v1-2)

Firstly then, the how. According to Paul, the gospel is something – like a medical treatment or a rescue from danger – that needs to be understood, accepted, and taken hold of. It is not enough simply to believe something to be true. The antibiotics are of no use if they remain in the box or bottle. You are not saved from drowning until you take hold of the outstretched hand of the air sea rescue crew member.

Paul, in verses 1-2, talks about these things. The gospel is good news – rescue and healing freely offered, but that has to be appropriated. There are three steps - three words – that encapsulate this process: receive, believe and hold. And each are essential.

1. Received

The good news needs to be heard and received – we need to know what God has done, what God is offering to us in Jesus. Whilst certain people are called to be preachers or evangelists, we all have a role – as different parts of the body – in ensuring that the gospel message gets shared with those around us. The message needs to be sent in order to be received!

2. Believed

And having heard it, we need to have sufficient confidence in what we have heard to affect our attitudes and actions – it needs to be believed. Now, belief does not mean not having doubt. I may not be completely convinced that the antibiotics will heal me, or that the air sea rescue will be able to helicopter me out of the raging ferment. But at long as I have enough faith to take the tablets or grab the dangling winch, I have a chance. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I will never know if my trust is well-placed or misplaced unless I try!

3. Held

Which takes us to the third word and stage: the gospel - God's word to a perishing people – needs to be grasped, and held firmly. To change the metaphor slightly, Paul says it is something on which we need to take our stand. The ideas of holding and standing make it clear that it is not just about what goes on in your head – though that is very important – it is how your head then directs you to live. If you receive and believe the gospel, it will change the way you think – about God, about yourself, and about others. And it will change the way you speak and act in relation to God, to yourself and to others. The gospel transforms what we are and what we do.

C. The gospel foundation (v3-10)

So we have thought bit about what the gospel is in very broad terms, and how we might respond to it: how we might receive, believe and take hold of it. But we've not really thought about what it actually is. Many religions offer salvation and healing of a sort. But it all needs unpicking; what exactly is on offer? What is the Christian gospel? The clue is in the name. It is centred on Christ. It seems rather obvious to say it, but maybe it needs to be said that any "gospel" that is not centred on Christ is not the Christian gospel. The Christian gospel fundamentals – those things which are of first importance – are about Christ, and what he has done. Again, there are three main steps – three words – that sum it up: died, raised, appeared. And each is essential.

1. Christ died (paying)

That Christ died is a rather uncontroversial fact attested in history. Alongside the accounts gathered in the New Testament, secular historians write of Jesus, around whom a movement formed, and who was crucified by the Romans. It was not unusual at the time for messianic movements to spring up around charismatic individuals, and for the Romans to step in and crush these uprisings that threatened the status quo. Jesus death was witnessed by many – ordinary people, Romans, the Jewish authorities, those who were his followers and others who were merely onlookers.

That Jesus of Nazareth died is not seriously contested. That Jesus died "for our sins" is the distinctively Christian understanding of that event that sets it apart from the other crucifixions at the time. And it is that conviction that is tied to the second and third steps.

2. Christ was raised (proving)

Jesus died and was buried. But on the third day – in contrast to the would-be 'messiahs' of the first century and everyone else who has ever died – he was raised to life. The resurrection of Christ is fundamentally important for a whole host of reasons.

As Paul says later in the chapter, without the resurrection of Christ, the whole of the Christian faith is null and void; remove that cornerstone and the whole edifice comes tumbling down. If Christ is not raised, his words are proved to be false and we can't trust anything that he said. But if he has been raised from the dead, by the power of God himself, Jesus has the divine endorsement, God's seal of approval, the Almighty himself has countersigning the salvation contract.

Without the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, there is no proof that Jesus' death on the cross was effective at winning our salvation, our healing. But if Jesus was raised, then we can be confident that Christ did in fact not just die, but died for our sins, and was effective in dealing with them. On the cross, Jesus defeats all our enemies – sin, the Devil and his claim on our lives, and the ultimate enemy of all, death itself.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is both the divine endorsement of Jesus and the demonstration of salvation won. Jesus raised from the dead to the new resurrection life is the reality that is now possible for every human being, and depends on our receiving, believing and taking hold of the gospel.

3. Christ appeared (transforming)

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is attested to by eyewitnesses, and the phenomenal growth of the Church despite severe persecution. The conviction that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day fuelled the transformation of individual lives and the growth of the Church, and changed the world. But it was only possible because of the third stage. Jesus died, Jesus was raised, and Jesus appeared.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not just an idea, a metaphysical notion, a neat theological theory. It is a reality that impacts the lives of individuals. From the very first believers, down through two millennia and today, individuals have encountered the risen Christ and had their lives transformed.

Before his ascension, that was a tangible, physical appearance of his resurrection body. But every believer since has an experience of the risen Christ. Shortly before his ascension to heaven, Jesus tells his disciples “behold, I am with you, to the very end of the age”. Jesus appears to and abides with all his people. By his Spirit he is in the midst of us, guiding, teaching and empowering.

An encounter with the risen Jesus makes all the difference, bringing joy out the despair of the first disciples, creating belief where there was initially cynicism in the blood family of Jesus himself, and transforming a persecutor of the Church to its greatest evangelist. The appearance of Jesus – of the grace of God incarnate – makes all the difference.

D. Conclusion (v11)

So what should we all be reminded of today? What is of first importance that we should never forget or allow to slip our minds? It is that Christ died our sins, was raised on the third day, and appeared to and dwells with his people. That is the bedrock of the gospel on which all Christian believers stand, the saving word of God to which we must hold to firmly. Whoever preaches it, and however we come to receive, believe and take hold of it, it is the objective good news, grounded in the facts of history and innumerable lives transformed, wonderfully non-negotiable and gloriously liberating. It is by this gospel that you are saved. Praise be to God!