

The Centrality of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1-11; December 4, 2022

Introduction:

This past week I used a couple of different advent devotionals but one of them was from the Bible Project and the theme this week has been on “hope.” In that video they describe hope as “anticipating a future that is better than the present.”

- It’s like the anticipation that kids (including myself) have for Christmas day. We feel giddy and excited for presents that we hope to get.

Hope is an extremely important concept in the Bible and in life. As we think about advent, it’s as if we are re-enacting the thousands of years God’s people *HOPED* for arrival of a messiah. The longing for the 1st *coming/advent* of Jesus. As we participate in advent, we now also long for his *second coming*.

- Central to both of these are the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection not only opened up a new door of hope, it secured that hope; the hope that God would rescue all creation from evil and death.

Context:

But at Corinth, there were key questions surrounding the resurrection of Jesus and implications for the resurrection of believers.

- Some were saying that there was no resurrection for believers who had died (v. 12).
- Some were confused about how believers who had died would be raised and what kind of body they would have (v. 35).

And the implications are clear, as says, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (15:14).

So what does Paul do?

- He unpacks the essentials of the gospel and establishes the historical reliability of Jesus’ death and resurrection as foundational to the Christian hope of the resurrection from the dead.
- The main argument: God bodily resurrected Jesus from the dead and therefore he will bodily resurrect believers from the dead.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

A few initial observations:

- Paul reminds them of “the gospel.”
 - The gospel has been a central theme in this entire letter.
 - “*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel*” (1 Corinthians 1:17, *ESV*; cf. 9:12, 14, 16, 18, 23)

- This gospel was of “first importance.”
- Paul elaborates on this gospel and its implication on their lives in chronological order:
 - The gospel was preached to them by Paul.
 - They received the gospel.
 - They stand on the gospel.
 - They are being saved by this gospel and will be saved by the gospel as God completes the work he has started in them.
- Paul then uses four key verbs to summarize this gospel that is transforming their lives:
 - Christ died.
 - He was buried.
 - He was raised.
 - He appeared.

I want to share with you five truths about the gospel that Paul unpacks:

I. The gospel is the culmination of the message of the OT (3-4):

Paul repeats this phrase twice: “in accordance with the Scriptures.”

- Most likely, Paul is rooting the authority of the gospel in the OT.
 - It’s exactly what Jesus taught with:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,” (John 5:39, ESV)

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47, ESV)

- Generally speaking, the cross and resurrection are the climax of the story of the Bible (of salvation history).
 - Additionally, the message of the OT gives us categories through which to rightly understand the cross. For example: OT categories of sacrifice, atonement, suffering and so forth (so Barrett).
 - Go read the NT letter: Hebrews. The writer consistently argues that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of these “types” in the OT
- Yet, it is also likely that Paul had in mind specific passages in the OT that allude to the gospel.
 - The Cross
 - Isaiah 53 and the suffering servant.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5, ESV)

- The Resurrection
 - The Psalms that praise God for delivering a righteous sufferer: Ps. 110; Ps. 8 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28); Ps. 16:9-10 (cf. Acts 2:24-31).

“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” (Psalm 16:10, ESV)

- Allusions to the “third day”
 - Hosea 6:2
 - Jonah 1:17 (he was in the belly of a fish for 3 days and 3 nights; cf. Matt. 12:40)

Implications:

- You can stake your life on the gospel because the gospel is the culmination of God’s story of redemption in the Scriptures.
- This is also a great example for us: as a church, we are to base our theology and practices on the Scriptures. In all that we do, we should be asking, “Is this in accordance with the Scriptures.”

II. The gospel is the good news of Jesus’ sacrificial death (3).

- “Christ died for our sins”
- Implied here is how the gospel fits into the larger story of God’s redemption. In other words, why did Jesus need to die?
 - Remember how the story begins?
 - Creation
 - Fall
 - When Adam and Eve sinned, sin spread like a virus infecting and corrupting everything and everyone.
 - Because of God’s common grace, we are not as sinful as we could be and this world is not as corrupt as it could be.
 - As a result of their sin, they were kicked out (or exiled) out of the garden.
 - Sin is what separates us from God and sin is why Jesus died on the cross.
 - Christ’s death is a sacrificial death.
 - Expiation: the removal and cleansing of our sin and guilt through his sacrificial death.
 - The sin offering on the Day of Atonement involved two goats. One was sacrificed for the sake of its blood. The high priest would then press both hands onto the head of the 2nd goat and confessed those sins over the animal. That animal was then driven far from

the face of God into the wildness.

- Propitiation: satisfying or exhausting the wrath of God.
 - At the very same time, Jesus' death is a propitiatory death. It changes God's disposition towards us from being at enmity with us to being *for* us.
 - As a result we are restored to fellowship with him.
- Christ's death is an extremely personal death.
 - He died for you and me.

Implications:

- In order for you to join in the benefits of the gospel, you must confess, "I'm a sinner."
 - It's one thing to intellectually know you are a sinner and it's another thing to experientially know you are sinner.
 - Some of you have heard my daughter Ava share the story of how God saved her.
 - Punch line: With tears running down her face, I ask her: "Ava, what's wrong?" She replied: "Dad, I know I'm a sinner."
- When you KNOW you are a sinner and that your sin separates you from God, do you know how good is to also hear: "Christ died for our sins."
- Do you KNOW that you are a sinner?
- Have you confessed your sin and placed your faith and trust in Jesus?

III. The gospel is the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead (4-9).

- As crucial as the death of Christ was, so is the resurrection. The death of Christ would not be good news without the resurrection.

The Creedal Tradition:

- With Paul's language of "delivered" (v. 3) and "received" (v. 3), some describe what Paul shares here as a "creedal tradition." That he was handing on a body of information that he had received from others and that it didn't include any additional words or comments from Paul.
- Paul is insisting that he is faithfully recounting the testimony that had been handed down to him. In other words, what he's sharing here came from the very mouths of those who actually saw Jesus.
 - Where did he receive this information?
 - Paul most likely received it either soon after his conversion in Damascus (AD 34) or three years later when he spent time in Jerusalem with Peter and James (AD 37; cf. Gal. 1:18-19).
- "When you survey the literature, scholars from all different backgrounds and faiths (or no faith) are virtually unanimous that this creedal tradition dates, on average, to within five years of Jesus's death" (Justin Bass). Some argue it was formulated within months of Jesus death.

The pattern of appearances:

1. Cephas (aka Peter).

- The Aramaic name for Peter
- God's chosen leader for ministry to the Jews.

2. The Twelve.

- This was the name that had become attached to Christ's closest followers.
- Acts 1:15-26 informs us that Matthias replaced Judas after Jesus' ascension.

3. The Crowd of More than 500.

- "At one time"
- "Some have fallen asleep"
 - *Sleep* is a euphemism for death when speaking of believers because we believe that one day we will "wake up."
- "Most of whom are still alive"
- Where were these people? In Jerusalem.
 - Think about this: the early message of Christianity was preached in Jerusalem, the easiest place to verify the facts. Was the tomb empty? Go and look for yourselves.
 - Plus, go talk to these people who are still alive.
 - Paul was inviting anyone who doubted that Jesus had appeared to people after his death to go talk to the eyewitnesses.

4. James.

- This is the brother of Jesus who became an important leader of the church in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12).
- He was pretty skeptical during Jesus' ministry (cf. Mark 3:21; 6:2-4, 6; John 7:5).

5. All the Apostles.

- It's not clear who would have been included in this group. It was larger than *The Twelve*. In addition to James and Paul, other possibilities include Matthias, Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 15:2), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7).

6. Paul (the least of the apostles).

- God's chosen leader for ministry to the Gentiles.
- "Last of all"
 - This suggests that Paul did not expect there to be any apostles chosen after him, those who saw the resurrected Jesus (so Ciampa and Rosner; ESV Study Bible).
- "As to one untimely born"
 - The word can refer to a premature birth, abortion, miscarriage or birth that goes beyond term.
 - Birth beyond term:
 - Some see this as the appropriate explanation since the appearance to Paul

was later than that of the others.

- Abortion or miscarriage:
 - “This would conjure up the image of Paul as a grotesque infant whose birth experience was far from what might normally be expected” (Ciampa and Rosner).
 - “A man in the depths of misery is compared to a stillborn child” (Munck).
- However Paul is using it, he’s highlighting the abnormal nature of his apostolic call.
- “Least of the apostles, unworthy to be call an apostle”
 - Paul was a persecutor of the church (cf. Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1-2; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13).
 - Paul drawing attention to the reality that he doesn’t deserve to be an apostles highlights a key theme: God’s surprising grace.
- Paul’s point isn’t to draw attention to himself but to the surprising and undeserved grace of God.
 - Peter from denial to restoration.
 - Paul from church persecutor to church planter.
 - James: it doesn’t seem that he was a follower of Jesus before his death and resurrection.
 - God gives life to those who (humanly speaking) would be beyond all hope.

Apologetic Sidebar:

- Could the disciples have stolen the body?
 - They were willing to suffer and die for this belief. Benjamin Shaw notes, “Liars promote lies in order to make their lives more comfortable but not to encounter greater suffering.”
 - If the body was stolen, how do you still explain the conversions of Paul and James. It was the resurrected Jesus that completely changed their lives.
- What about the hallucination theory?
 - There were multiple group appearances. Are you telling me that over 500 people all hallucinated at the same time?
 - Paul, a persecutor of the church, would not have been likely to hallucinate.
 - If they had hallucinated, the tomb wouldn’t have been empty. People could’ve easily just said, “Guys, go check the tomb. The body is there.”

Implication: The resurrection is a powerful, historical reality.

- If you disbelieve the resurrection, what explanation do you have for how the Christian church got started at all? You can’t just disbelieve the resurrection. You have to come up with a historically feasible alternative explanation.
- “However, the Christian view of resurrection, absolutely unprecedented in history, sprang up full-blown immediately after the death of Jesus. There was no process or development. His followers said that their beliefs did not come from debating and discussing. They were just telling others what they had seen themselves. No one has

come up with any plausible alternative to this claim” (Keller).

- Think about it: whatever these people saw, it was worth giving their lives for. They were willing to suffer and die for these claims.
- Here’s a powerful question to engage our world with: what is the power that transformed the apostles’ lives, birth the church and turned the Roman Empire upside down?

IV. The benefits of the gospel are experienced through persevering faith (1-2, 11).

The gospel is what Paul (and all the apostles) preached:

- Paul’s point is that all the apostolic witnesses are all on the same page and that the gospel received and believed by the Corinthians had the same content regardless of which apostle first preached it to them.

The gospel demands a response:

- Read 15:11.
- Re-read 15:1-2.
- We don’t contribute anything to the gospel. The gospel is good news that we respond to.
- The way we respond is through repentance and faith. And this isn’t a one-time deal, but this is what we stake our life on.
 - You received: initial faith.
 - You stand: current and daily faith.
 - You are being saved/hold fast: ongoing and future faith.
- I don’t believe that Paul was saying that those who are saved can lose their salvation.
- I also don’t believe that Paul was saying believers never struggle with sin or failure.
- What was Paul saying?
 - Genuine salvation shows itself in persevering faith over the long haul of life.
 - Paul’s general assumption is that those who confess Jesus will remain faithful, but the tragic truth is that not all end up doing so.
 - This is a call to watch our life and doctrine. It’s a call to watchfulness and diligence.

V. The gospel empowers and shapes all of life (10).

This is the heart of Paul’s point:

- The gospel, namely, the grace of God, characterized his entire existence and life.
- One of my summers in college I spent with a campus ministry serving in Central Asia. I met a missionary there who really helped me as I was wrestling through understanding the grace of God and the role or part I play. He took me to 1 Cor. 15:10.
- This tension was so helpful for me to meditate on:
 - “I worked harder than any of them”
 - “Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me”
 - This is similar to Col. 1:29:

“*For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*” (Colossians 1:29, ESV)

- No sooner has Paul strongly affirmed how hard he worked, however, than he corrected himself and pointed out that it was not to him that his untiring work should be attributed but to the grace of God. And Paul does not describe his hard work as a matter of cooperating with God’s grace but entirely as an effect of God’s grace. What was on display was not a manifestation of Paul’s capabilities or efforts *but of the grace of God* that was with him (Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner).

The Point: Cling to and build your life on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I’m giddy and excited for Christmas day. But the gospel gives me even more hope for life here and eternal life to come. Hold Fast to this gospel!!!

Let’s pray.