

As of First Importance - The Gospel

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[0:00] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you, Father, that your word became flesh and dwelt among us. Thank you, Father, that you are gracious and merciful with us today.

So, Father, as we open your word, we ask that you would be with us, that you would minister to us, that you would open our hearts to believe your word. And, Father, we ask that you would dwell with us and teach us what you want us to believe and what you want us to know.

So, Father, would you bless this time, and we commend this time to you in Jesus' name. Amen. So, about a month ago, I bought a car.

And it's not my first car. It's my second car. And it's not my first used car. It was my second used car. And when I bought the car, you know, it was a good deal. It was a really good car.

I'm really, really happy for the car. And I actually sincerely believe that it's a blessing from God. But I bought it from a stranger. And when you buy things from a stranger, you kind of have to have faith in this fellow stranger that they are telling you the truth.

[1:12] And, you know, the price is good. The mileage is good. I want it to be true. And I don't really have anything to which I can base this desire on. Because, really, I don't know the person.

And I don't know if they're lying to me. So, I paid a good price. And I had to go through the safety and all those different things. And it ended up costing me a little bit more.

Actually, quite a bit more than I expected at first. And for many people, they actually see the Christian faith just in the same light. Where there isn't actually any proof for Christianity.

You kind of have to just believe what the others say. And you kind of have to kind of go blindly towards Christianity and say, Well, you know what? I'll believe it. And they find out later, well, this is not true.

This is not based on reality. And so, today we're going to look at something very interesting. It's a letter from the Apostle Paul who talks to the Corinthian church. And essentially, what Paul is doing, he's going to open up the fine print of Christianity.

[2:11] He's going to look at what Christianity is all about. What is the main essential claim of Christianity? And he's going to open it up right wide open so that we can look at it. And see for ourselves if this is true.

If this is worth believing. So, if you have your Bibles, I would ask you to open to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. And we're going to read verses 1 to 11. Now, I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

[3:34] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Whether then it was I or they, so he preached, and so he believed. This is the word of the Lord. So here Paul is, I'll just give a bit of a context.

Paul is writing to a Corinthian church. And this happens about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus. And so Paul is writing to them, and if you read the first, say, eleven chapters of Corinthians,

this letter that he wrote to them, he's essentially giving them a rebuke.

He's correcting them for the things that went wrong within the church. And now he's giving them a bit of hope. He's turning the tone of the letter into, this is what you should do.

You should go back to the basics of the Christian faith and what you actually first believed. So Corinth, in a sense, was a very popular city, in the sense that they have a very interesting culture, a culture that is very worldly.

[4 : 41] There was an expression that said, they live as in Corinth. And to us that doesn't mean anything. But to them, back in the day, someone from Athens would say, ah, they're living as in Corinth.

People would say, oh, okay, okay, I know what you mean. And to us, it's essentially the same as saying, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. And we don't really know what that means, but we have an idea that it's something very sinful, and maybe we shouldn't ask because it might be a little embarrassing for them.

So here, Paul is talking to these people who kind of let the spirit of Corinth come into the church, whereas the church was supposed to influence Corinth.

And so he's giving them a direction. Here we see in verse 1, So there's this implication that we need to respond to this gospel, that there is something that we believe in, and that we don't just believe in here in our minds, but we actually hold on to it.

We cling to it. We live by it. And we hope in it. And Paul is making this case that it is the gospel that he preached to them, and also this word that he preached to them.

[6 : 04] And he's talking about these things. He's bringing them together, saying that these are one thing. So the gospel, as we read on the projector, it's the good news. It's another word for good news.

And the word here, in the Greek, is, in a sense, it's really a substance. That's what Paul means here. So it's kind of giving a tone to the word, word here.

So there's a substance in which we believe, and this substance is good news. It's talking about an event. So this event, this good news, is something in which we should believe.

Now Paul is implying here when he says, unless you believed in vain, he's talking about two different ways that we can approach the gospel. There is right belief in the gospel.

There's a right way to respond to the gospel. And there is a wrong way to respond to the gospel, or a wrong approach to the gospel. And we see here, when he talks about it in verse 3, for I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received.

[7 : 07] He's not saying anything new, anything that comes from Paul. He's only passing along the baton to them. Something that he received, and he's passing along to them. So, what is wrong belief?

Well, there are many ways that we can approach that, many ways that we can see what is wrong belief. Some people will believe, or they will believe that they're Christians because they're afraid of hell, and that they will become Christians so that they can escape hell.

Other people, it's kind of like the opposite tone of that is the more positive light. They want to go to heaven. They just, they want to be in heaven when they die, so they become Christians. But they don't really know much more than that.

And other people, it's because they grew up in a Christian family. They grew up going to church, and so therefore, they are Christians. But Paul is saying something a little bit different here. And he, Paul, wants us to go right back to the basics.

Now, I'm reminded of this one time when I had a phone bill come in through the mail. And I won't tell you how much it is because my parents are here. But I had to call them and say, look, there's something wrong here.

[8 : 18] What do you mean my bill is X amount of dollars? And they had to, you know, explain, you know, sir, this is what you signed up for. Didn't you look at the fine print? And, of course, the fine print, I don't read the fine print.

It's about 10 pages long. The letters are this big. Like, I don't have time for that. But it's really important that we shouldn't be surprised when we see that our faith is not working out for us.

So I have a friend who recently told me that they're no longer Christians. And this person, this friend, told me why they're not a Christian. And they gave me this explanation why.

And some of the reasons were, well, you know, the Old Testament is very violent. And God wants us to do those things. He wants us to stone people and children and all those things. And then he went on to tell me how the church is a business.

And they're all about making money and taking your money from them. And I was just like, oh, what are they saying? So at the end of this big soliloquy, I asked them, so do you believe you're a sinner?

[9 : 22] And the person was thrown off. Well, no, of course not. And that's when I realized, oh, this person, this friend does not believe that they're sinful.

And that's why all these different peripheral things, these different peripheral issues in the Bible, they don't make sense to them. It's not actually because these things define God in a way that they want to interpret God.

But it's actually because they don't want to be known. They don't want to believe that they're sinful. They don't want to believe that they have sin that holds them accountable to God. So here we have the substance of the gospel.

We have Paul saying that there's the gospel, the good news, which is the substance of Christian faith. And he's talking about as well the substance in here at verse 2. So when he says, if you hold fast to the substance, I preach to you.

And he's about to lay it out here. So verse 3. So if you notice here, it talks about in accordance with the scriptures.

[10 : 38] And honestly, if the scriptures spoke about one thing and then Jesus did another thing, then we should abandon the whole thing completely. Because it doesn't make sense.

There's no cohesiveness. There's no coherence in the whole story, the big picture of the Bible. But here's the thing. Jesus makes sense according to the scriptures.

He was talked about in the scriptures. If we look at the big picture of the Bible, we see that in Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth. And he makes it and it was good. And then he puts mankind on this earth so that they can have this relationship.

But then we see shortly after that the first man and first woman, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God. And so they became enemies of God. And God made a promise that he would fix it.

He would fix his project. He would take care of his project because Adam and Eve and their descendants would not be able to. So God is going to take care of it. And when God gathers the people of Israel, he gives them this practice that they should sacrifice animals so that when they put their hands on the animal, their sin would go into that animal.

[11 : 47] And then the animal would be slain and their sins would be remembered no more in God's eyes. And now in this time, the flow of the Bible is that God would open up his people to all the Gentiles so that they can come in so his people would be both Jew and Gentile in Jesus.

And in sending Jesus, when people put their faith in Jesus, put their trust in Jesus as the Lamb of God, they will receive salvation. Their sins will be remembered no more before God.

So this absolutely makes sense in the whole scope of Scripture. And when it says in accordance with the Scriptures, we can believe that. Verse 4, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with Scriptures.

Now there isn't much saying explicitly about being buried, being three days. There is something about being buried that Joseph of Arimathea would buy a tomb for him and that he would be buried there.

And that he would be raised from the dead. And that's something that's fairly common in the Old Testament, that we believe that they had this expectation that the dead would be raised on the last day. And so Jesus here is raised from the dead.

[13 : 03] Now, in the last month, there's been a few people, or a couple of people that I know that are dear to me, who passed away, and I've been to their funerals. And it's always a strange thing.

What is death? What is this thing, death, that awaits us at the end of our life? We try to find solutions to death. We want to spiritualize it and say, well, you know, we're going back to the ground and where we belong, we're going to be one with nature again.

Or, you know, we want to say that everyone's going to the same place. It's all going to be good.

We're actually going to a better place. And really, it's hard to tell what's happening at death.

What is death anyway? So we all want this solution to death because we're afraid of death. And we want death to be taken care of.

And if death is going to be taken care of, it needs to happen, this cure, this antidote to death needs to happen in the realm of reality. Because if we just think of something about death, that is, you know, what happens after life, if we just think about it, we create this new concept, it doesn't really solve anything.

[14 : 14] So we need to have something that comes into life, something that comes into death, something that is victorious through death. And this is exactly what Jesus is doing. Jesus lived a perfect life, as we see in the picture here.

And then he died the death that he shouldn't have died, but he died the death that we should have died. And then he rose from the dead. And that's why the Christian faith is the only one that provides the true antidote to death, that the death is not the end, but that the resurrection, that Jesus, who is life and who is the resurrection, gives us this new hope.

So now we need to respond to that. And Paul tells us in verses 1 to 2 that we need to receive it, we need to stand on it, we need to hold fast to it, and by that we will be saved.

And for a lot of people, they think, again, that story at the beginning that when you buy a car, you know, you have to close your eyes and just, you know, hope that it's going to work out, but you don't really know.

But I think a good illustration that talks about faith is that we, in a sense, are falling down from an airplane, we're falling in the sky, and we need something to save us.

[15 : 33] We need something that will protect us and break us from the fall. And this is the parachute. This is the only thing that we can have. So in a sense, we need to open up the parachute.

Jesus is the one who can save us. We hold on to the parachute, but it's not the fact that we're holding on to the parachute that's saving us, but it's actually the parachute itself. And we trust in the parachute that it will slow our fall so that we don't die, but that we will land safely.

And this is kind of like an image of faith and how we should look at the response. So here's another evidence. We have the scriptures that testify about Jesus, but there's also something else.

Let's read in verse 5. So we have a lot of appearances here.

And this is a very big deal because if Jesus was raised, but it's only a symbol, it's only an allegory that his memory will be with us forever.

[16 : 51] If that was true, then there shouldn't be any eyewitnesses, but there are. And there are many of them. And in fact, there are more than what this text is talking about. If you read the Gospels, you see that there's Mary and there's a few different apostles that he walks into the city and then there's the fishermen.

So there's a lot more than what this text is saying. And this text, in a sense, is saying, well, the Corinthians, they would know these people. They can go to these people and ask them, did Jesus actually rise from the dead?

Did Jesus die for our sins? Was he actually who he said he was? So some of you know that I'm a baker. You know that I like to bake and I've done a few weddings and different events.

And if you guys wanted to have a cake for your next birthday or wedding, you would come and ask me, who can I ask for a recommendation? I want to know if you're able to do the job. So I would point out some friends from maybe Messiah, some friends that I would assume that are in your circle of friends so that you can go and ask them and you know who they are.

You know that they're taste buds. You can trust them and from that point on, you can say, okay, well, you know what? I'll go through with this.

[18 : 05] This is essentially what Paul is doing. He's naming these people. There's James here who is the archbishop or the archbishop, the bishop, I guess, of Jerusalem. He's the overseer of the church of Jerusalem.

You have Peter who is here called Cephas in verse five who is the itinerant preacher. He would travel. So these people would know these witnesses.

These witnesses, they would be able to ask them the question, did Jesus really rise from the dead? Was he actually in bodily form or was he just a spirit or is he just a figment of our imagination? So here in the Christian faith, evidence is important.

Paul sees evidence as very, very important and very essential to the Christian faith, the whole message. Now, what about these witnesses?

Like, I don't know, there's a lot of them. It's 2,000 years ago. These people were, you know, less intelligent. You might be thinking, you know, they didn't have all the knowledge that we have today. [19 : 05] I can't really trust these witnesses. Let me ask you, where were you or what were you doing? Was it September the 11th, 2001?

Where were you and what were you doing September 11th, 2005?

And where were you September 11th, 2013? Now, it's interesting that we remember very vividly where we were in 2001.

What about 2005? What about 2013? 2013. It's interesting that this event that really marked that one year we remember much clearer than what happened the years that came after.

And in a sense, this is what the gospel witnesses are all about. That there was this big event, this very, I don't want to say traumatic, but it's this event that is out of the ordinary, something that's extraordinary, where a man who rises from the dead, the one who claimed to be the Messiah rises from the dead, he appears to all these people and they would be able to give the testimony of him in a way that is accurate.

[20 : 24] So this should be able to give us a little bit more trust in that. And we see in verse 11, and I'll just read it, whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believe.

So they share the exact same message, and it's a very simple message. It's not going in too much depth, but it's talking about one thing, that Jesus actually lived, he died, and he rose from the dead, that all of them would share that same message.

So here's the third evidence. Let us read verse 8 to 10. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me, for I am the least of the apostles, unworthy 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 toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

A very strange thing happened here. The apostle Paul, who we see as super Paul or super apostle, is the, probably the largest contributor to the New Testament, but it's talking about how Paul persecuted the church.

[21 : 42] Now, if we knew Paul in his days, we would think, you know, he's kind of like that kid in the playground who just tells on you all the time to the teacher and always pleases the teacher, and you're just fed up with that person because he's always going by the rules, he's always trying to, you know, make his way all the way to the top, and he's kind of ripping us off in a sense.

Paul was a very, very religious man. He was very devout to his faith, and he wasn't necessarily pleasing to be around. And it says here that Paul persecuted the church of God, and it's interesting that a lot of these people, Peter and James, would remember Paul being this persecutor of the church.

But he says here, but by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. Something happened. Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus in his life.

He encountered Jesus, and this encounter was so powerful that it would make his trajectory in life completely different, that he would make a whole 180 degrees in his life to follow this Jesus whom he was persecuting.

So this is a very, very important witness that the witness of Jesus who appears to us changes and transforms our lives.

[23 : 08] So here in the ESV, in the English Standard Version that I'm reading, it's not very, very clear, but I did look at the Greek translation. It's talking about here in verse 8.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. It says here, as to one untimely born. And the tone of this slogan that he gives himself is a little bit awkward.

It's a little bit different. It talks about as if to an aborted fetus. And that's, that's strange. So, Paul uses this because his conversion was so unnatural.

He was going one way and his trajectory was going one way and then all of a sudden he is taking out of this trajectory and he's put into somewhere else. And, you know, praise God that that happened, but that's a weird title to give yourself and it's a very uncomfortable title to give yourself. And Paul puts it here in his testimony. And he also puts that he persecuted the church of God. And I can just imagine Paul going from one place to another and his testimony that he was the persecutor of God.

[24 : 21] Yes, that's a great story. That's a great story. But this testimony that he is the one who would attack these Christians is probably a very, very haunting one to him. You know, there's a lot of things that I regret having done in my life and I'm a Christian now.

I can say, wow, by God's grace, you know, I'm a new man and, you know, God is great. But the memory of this, of the things that I've lived, the things that I've done, still haunts me.

And I think about it almost every day. It's like this little, I don't know, this little character that comes beside me and says, hey, do you remember me? And he tries to explain to me who I was.

And it's interesting here that in the scripture, Paul does not neglect his testimony. He does not put it away. He does not try to put it in a box and forget about it. But it's right there. And we're reading about it 2,000 years later.

You know, there's a lot of spiritual practices that try to meditate our way out of who we are because the burden of our, of the reality is so hard and intolerable as we even pray that the burden of them is intolerable.

[25 : 37] The burden of our sins is intolerable. And there's more religious people who like to do the right thing and do the right rules and practice them so that the remembrance of, of who we were and the sins that we've committed would be no more.

And we have to acknowledge that these things leave a really deep scar in our lives, that they are wounds in our lives. and the gospel brings us to a different place where there is, where we don't forget who we were and we don't try to please God so that we, so that he would forget who we were but both of them collide together.

The new us and the old us. And that meets perfectly in the cross. When we look at Jesus, we see him here, he's on the cross and he has holes in his hands and he has holes in his feet and the story would say that he would have a lot of whipping marks on his body and this would speak of the sins that we committed.

Theologically speaking, it would be because of our sins. It would not be because of his sins because he didn't have any. Now, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, these scars would tell the story of a blasphemer.

They would tell the story of a man who claimed to be the Messiah but, you know, he's nothing else. But, Jesus rose from the dead and we see him here.

[27 : 15] He still has the marks in his hands and these tell a different story. These tell the story of a victory over sin and over death.

You know, we read that when Paul says, but by God's grace, I am what I am. And some days, I can't even lift up my fist to say that and can say, well, you know, I am what I am.

But, the memory of the things that I've done is so true and so vivid and I don't even know how to deal with it. And I think it's important that we notice that Paul keeps it in his testimony because instead of thinking as Paul, as the super apostle, as super Paul, he had real struggles just like you and me.

And Paul here acknowledges that he has these deep wounds and he has these deep cuts of the things that he's done. But they have a new name. They have a new meaning to them.

And just like Jesus holds on his hands and on his feet, these speak of a new story. Not that of brokenness, but that of victory. So God's grace leads us to a place where we can acknowledge, yes, we have this pain, we have this brokenness, but now they have a new name and we don't have to hide it.

[28 : 37] We can share it with one another. We can share that we have a lot of things that hold us back and things that have hurt us along the way. But that's not the end of the story.

That Jesus rose from the dead and when we put our faith and trust in Jesus, complete trust, complete dependence upon Jesus, who is the only one who can pay for our sins, the only one who gives the right and complete antidote to death, our hope will not be in vain, that our hope will be in Jesus who has risen from the dead and that we will be with him.

Earlier we read on the screen the lamb who was on the throne as if he was slain. as if he was slain. It's probably not a pretty sight, but they tell the story of victory.

Please stand. Heavenly Father, thank you that thank you that you do not by your grace completely erase the memory of who we were, but Father, that you bring redemption, that you give a new name and a new reason and a new purpose for who we are.

Father, would you help us to come to you with all that we are and Father, would you be gracious to touch every part of who we are and give it a new name.

[30 : 10] Would you help us to walk in victory? Father, would you bless us and bless this time? We look to you, God. You're the only one who is worthy of all praise.

You're the only one who can do any of this, who can bring healing, who can bring redemption and victory. Lord, we look to you in Jesus' name. Amen.