

EASTER DAY - What's the Bottom Line?

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[0 : 00] Amen. Please have a seat. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and so everything must change, everything.

In the middle of the first century, one of the eyewitnesses to this, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to a struggling church in what is modern day Greece.

It was the letter to the Corinthians and it's one of our earliest witnesses to the resurrection. It's about 20 years after the event, 25 years.

By historical standards, that's quite close to the event. Most of the major events of world history, the records of them are much longer periods after the actual event, have much bigger gaps, but this is quite close historically speaking.

And you might be tempted to think you're closer to the Easter event by reading Matthew's Gospel or Mark or Luke or John, but actually Corinthians would have been written before those Gospels.

[1 : 09] So if you want to see firsthand what happened, if you want to take in the Easter event, you need to come to this letter with open eyes with me today.

And it's a great text. Paul begins with a warning about the importance of Easter, the importance of the Easter message, which Paul calls the Gospel or the Good News.

He says, Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaim to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaim to you, unless, and here's the warning, unless you have come to believe in vain.

The Gospel is the good news of Easter that in a moment Paul will explain is the good news of the King's death for our sins and resurrection for us.

That is the Gospel. And it's the heart of Christianity, it's the heart of the Bible, it's the heart of the Christian life, and it's the heart of the Christian church.

[2 : 21] And Paul says, I would remind you, or even I should remind you, we need to be reminded of the Gospel regularly and often.

Now why do we need reminding? Well, two reasons. One is that this Gospel is counter to the logic of our world. It's counter to the wisdom of our world.

And therefore the world is constantly trying to sort of shape the way we think. We need regular refreshing and reminding lest the world's wisdom infect our thinking and we miss the Gospel.

The other reason we need reminding of the Gospel is that basically people are forgetful. I don't know whether you notice this, but we are all very forgetful people and we need more than just little snippets of the Gospel now and then.

We need to be intoxicated in this Gospel. We need to be soaked in this Gospel if we are to stand firm in it. Paul seems to be assuming and presupposing that unless he reminds the Corinthians of the Gospel, they are going to distort it and they are going to wreck it.

[3 : 35] And I think the Gospel is prone to distortion. In fact, that is exactly what was happening in Corinth. The Church had gone off kilter, had gone off track.

They had left the Gospel, been distracted from the Gospel. And experience shows both in churches and in individual lives that unless you are anchored in the Gospel regularly, it will get distorted.

I think this is the value, isn't it? This is the treasure of being part of a Church and the treasure of being part of a Church where there are other people who love the Gospel and who will remind you of the Gospel and of being part of a Church where we say the creeds.

So we have a reminder of a 2,000 year old summary of the Gospel to make sure we're staying on track. This is the treasure of being part of a Church that teaches the Bible so that we constantly bring ourselves back to the original message as it was proclaimed.

We need to make sure we're not just thinking we know what the Gospel is but it's actually not the Biblical Gospel. Left to our own devices, we will lose it.

[4 : 49] And Paul says, interestingly, not only was the Gospel how you become a Christian but the Gospel is how you stay a Christian. The Gospel is the place where you must stand.

It's the place where we live. The Gospel is the constitution of the Christian life not just the entry point of the Christian life. Now the Corinthian Church, they had moved on to greater things. They thought they were greater things but they weren't. They had moved on to super things, supernatural gifts, super apostles, super wisdom, super righteousness but none of these things were grounded in the Gospel.

They had lost it. So Paul says, he warns them, if you're going to stand, you stand in the Gospel. If you're going to live the Christian life, you live it holding firmly to the Gospel lest you believe in vain. Here is Paul's loving rebuke. If you want to be saved, you have to stand with all of God's people on the Gospel or else your faith is in vain, your belief is in vain.

[6 : 01] What a horrible thing. I would hate that for anyone that their faith in Jesus is in vain, that their belief is in vain and that means it doesn't count. God doesn't count it.

It won't save you. You're lost. You're not a real Christian unless you're holding firm and standing on this Gospel. So Paul says, this is important.

This really matters. Receive the Gospel. So the million dollar question is, well, what exactly is this Gospel? Can you spell it out for us? And Paul does exactly that.

In verses 3 onwards, he gives an explicit description of this is the Gospel. So let's hear it. Verse 3, For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received.

Here it is. Here's the Gospel. That Christ died for sins in accordance with the Scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

[7 : 04] That's the Gospel. And then there's some little bit of evidence of the Gospel. He appeared to Cephas, that is Simon Peter, and then to the Twelve, that is to the group of the Apostles, not including Paul yet.

Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James and to all the Apostles again, I guess.

And then last of all, he appears to Paul and he'll get to himself in a minute. So here's the Gospel. Jesus Christ, and Christ means he's the King, he's the Lord, he's the world's true Emperor.

The world's King died for our sins according to the promises of the Bible and he was buried and he rose again according to the promises of the Bible.

Now you may ask, where are those promises in the Bible? Where does it actually say Jesus will come and die and rise again? Well, I'll give a couple of examples. We could be here all day on that.

[8 : 08] Jesus took some people through the whole Bible and showed them this. Last Friday, on Good Friday, we looked at Isaiah chapter 53. That was a crystal clear prophetic description of Good Friday 800 years before it happened.

So that was one example of how Christ died according to the Scriptures. Now, then he was buried and we know the Romans, they don't make mistakes. When they're crucifying someone, you die. And so he was definitely buried dead. And the third day he rose according to the Scriptures. Now, where in the Scriptures does it anticipate that God's King will rise from the dead?

Well, I would, in summary, point you to the Psalms and to some of the Psalms that we spent January looking at. We looked at the Psalms that talked about God's King being exalted, being lifted up to the right hand of God, not seeing decay in the grave, Psalm 16.

You know, those messages are on the website. I refer you to them if you want to look that up. But it's very clear. Jesus died according to the Bible and he rose according to the Bible. And so that's God's proof, God's testimony to the Gospel.

[9 : 22] And there's a bit of a secondary evidence there that we've already seen that Jesus appeared to lots of people. He appeared to 500. And, you know, most of those people, Paul says, are still alive.

The Romans have not killed them off yet, though they're trying. Jerusalem has not killed them off yet, though they're trying. All the forces of civic power were harnessed to try and kill Christianity, to stop people saying, he is risen.

But even under torture, all they could say is, he is risen, I saw him. That's the truth. That's the proof. So here we are. This is the Gospel in which we stand.

The King died for our sins to rescue us and he rose again to the right hand of God. This is according to the Bible. That means if you want to be a Christian, if you want to be someone who stands in the Gospel, you need to be someone who stands in the Scriptures, who stands in the Bible.

It needs to be precious to you and you need to stand in the Gospel with the rest of us who are standing in the Gospel. Now, what effect does the Gospel have in our lives?

[10 : 32] Well, Paul has a very good illustration, his own life, his own transformation by the grace of the Gospel. An amazing miracle happened in Paul's heart and in Paul's life.

Now, here's how he describes the power of the Gospel in his heart. Last of all, verse 8, as to one untimely born or abnormally born, Jesus appeared also to me, that is to Paul.

Now, for I am the least of the apostles, says Paul, I am unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God, by the grace of the Gospel, I am what I am and his grace toward me has not been in vain. There's that word term again, 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. Paul is saying that the Gospel of grace, that the king died for his sins and rose again, transformed him from being a persecutor of the church to a lover of the church and a lover of Christ.

[11 : 46] The Gospel made him from being unfit to fit to be a leader in the church. The Gospel is what makes us fit. So the question is not whether you are fit enough for Jesus, it's whether you are willing to let the Gospel make you fit for heaven.

We don't make ourselves fit. And so the question is, are you willing to let the Gospel transform you and make you fit as it made Paul fit? Are you willing to let the Gospel bear fruit in your life?

Is it bearing fruit in your life? Is the Gospel of Jesus making you more prayerful? Is it making you more submissive? Is it making you more peaceful? Is it making you more loving the Word of God? Is it making you more loving the people of God? Is it making you more loving the worship of the king who died and rose in the Gospel? Sometimes I think we make a, we spoil grace a bit because we pick grace against works.

So we sort of say, we're saved by grace and not works and that's true. But you see, for Paul, he worked before he was a Christian and he worked after he was a Christian.

[12 : 58] What grace did was transform his works. Before he was a Christian, his works were works of self-righteousness, of religion. He persecuted the church because he thought he was doing God a favour.

He thought he was earning himself points for heaven by imprisoning Christians and killing them. He even laughed when the first martyr was killed, the godly young Christian man, Stephen, probably just in his late teens or early 20s.

Paul laughed at that and he thought he was right with God for that work. But what the Gospel did was transformed his works so that living by grace, he actually stopped persecuting the church and started building the church.

And so he's able to say God's grace to him was not in vain. Could you say that about your own life, that God's grace to you is not in vain? Just like he warned earlier, he said, don't believe in vain.

Don't let it be wasted. Now he says, don't let God's grace to you be wasted. Don't let it be in vain. The test is not how much you've worked for God but whether the Gospel has driven your works, whether the Gospel is transforming you by the grace it contains.

[14 : 17] And finally, Paul makes a final comment which is a huge thing which we're only going to just touch on now. He makes the comment that there's a link between the resurrection of Jesus and your resurrection.

There's a link between the raising of Jesus to eternal life and your immortality that is on offer. That's in verse 12 to 14. He says, Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, here's a rebuke.

How can some of you say that there's no resurrection of the dead? There are people in Corinth like today who are saying that when you die, that's the end, nothing else. Well, that's wrong, Paul says. That's not true.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, just think the logic through. Then Christ has not been raised and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain.

There's that word there, in vain. You see, Paul's making the point that if there's no Easter story, then there's no hope for humanity. If Easter is not true, historically, factually, actually happened

true, then there's no hope for the world.

[15 : 25] But because it is true, because Paul did meet the risen Jesus, because there is a factual basis for it, we have hope and the hope is that we'll be raised like Jesus, we'll be raised in Jesus.

And I just want to say, if you are not convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, I just invite you to let me take you out and buy you a coffee and I'll present to you the evidence.

I'll loan you the books that pointed out, I'll read the Bible with you and I'll show you the evidence. It's just a critical thing to be clear on, that Jesus rose from the dead, grounding our future hope.

So, let me just draw all these threads together and summarise. There are three ways in today's reading to have your Christian belief be in vain.

There are three ways, three warnings. The first warning was, if you are diverted from the Gospel, if you are distracted from the Gospel and not soaked in it, then there's a danger that you won't stand firm in the Gospel and what faith you have will be in vain.

[16 : 34] That was verse 2. Then in verse 10, Paul said, the grace of God in him was not in vain. And there he's saying, the privileges God has given him are not wasted on him.

And so you have to think, what privileges has God given you and are you using them, making the most of them or are they wasted? You may have been given a Christian upbringing.

You may have had exposure to a Gospel church. You may have a Bible on your shelf. But if you lack the fruit of the Gospel, the fruit of the Christian life, then there's a danger that your belief in Jesus is in vain, is wasted.

It won't count. And the third way named was, if it's not true, then we're all wasting our time. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we're all wasting our time.

It's all in vain. But friends, I want to tell you today, and I want to say strongly and sharply, Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and therefore everything must change in my life and in your life and in our lives together.

[17 : 42] He died for our sins according to the Scriptures and then He triumphantly rose from the grave, exalted according to the Scriptures. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Stand firm in Him. Stand firm in His Gospel, in His Easter announcement of His death for sins and His resurrection.

Let the grace of Jesus transform you from the inside out. Transform your hearts. Let it bear gospel fruit in your life for all the world to see and to believe.

And finally, the resurrection of Jesus establishes our hope. We can wake up and know there's a future to humanity, there's a future to our world. Lord, loved ones lost in Christ are not lost forever. They are with Christ. This life is not all there is, but we have a concrete, sure and fixed hope that we'll be raised by Him, to be like Him, to see Him and to live with Him and love Him forever.

[18 : 54] Amen.