

News, Good News, Powerful News

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[0 : 00] And now let's pray together as we come to God's Word. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.

Almighty God, you are the author of this book open in front of us. And as I come to preach from your Word and this congregation comes to hear your Word, I pray that you will speak to us from it. I ask that you will open our hearts and minds to receive your truth. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

1 Corinthians 15, beginning at verse 1 and reading through to verse 11. And the Apostle Paul writes these words. Now I would remind you, brothers, 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, that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

[1 : 36] 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 disciples.

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.

Whether it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Recently I came across an interview with an American veteran of the Second World War. And he had been serving with the Marines in the Pacific, and in 1945 he was in a training camp preparing to take part in the invasion of Japan.

[3 : 01] And the Marines knew that the invasion of mainland Japan would be the bloodiest battle of the war. They knew that many of them, if not most of them, would not survive.

And this soldier spoke frankly of his reaction when he heard of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that brought the war to an end. He said this, I was a 21-year-old second lieutenant leading a rifle platoon.

When the bombs dropped and the news began to circulate that the invasion of Japan would not, after all, take place, that we would not be obliged to run up the beaches near Tokyo while being mortared and shelled.

For all the fake manliness of our facades, we cried with relief and joy. We were going to live.

We were going to grow up to adulthood after all. That young soldier's life was changed by events in a far-off country. And there is the similarity with Christianity.

[4 : 12] For Christianity is the news of events that happened 2,000 years ago in a far-away country that can change your life today.

And tonight, I want you to hear the good news from this passage. And I hope, like that young soldier, this good news will bring you joy and relief. For it doesn't just assure you of human life here on this earth, but the gospel assures us of eternal life with God beyond the grave.

Three points this evening. First, Christianity isn't advice, it's news. Second, Christianity isn't just news, it's good news.

And third, Christianity is good news with the power to change you forever. First then, Christianity isn't advice, it's news.

Paul begins with these words in verse 1. Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you're being saved. [5 : 26] You know, when you turn to the Bible, there's always the temptation to think that the people of the ancient world were more primitive, more naive, and more gullible than 21st century people.

That was in no way the case. And Paul is about to remind these Christians, these Corinthians, of the message he preached to them that resulted in their conversion to Christianity. Remember what Bob read to us earlier in the service from chapter 6? Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

And that is what some of you were. That gives you some idea of life in Corinth. It was a city just like Glasgow. It was populated with people just like us.

The Corinthians were sophisticated and cultured. They were educated in the philosophy of ancient Greece. The Corinthians were pagans. The city was populated by Greeks and Romans, and they worshipped many different gods.

[6 : 41] The Corinthians were hedonists. Corinth was famous for its permissive lifestyle. It was the Las Vegas of the ancient world. But after Paul came to preach this message, they changed dramatically.

That is what some of you were past tense. How do you persuade that kind of people to convert to Christianity? Do you tell them to follow Jesus' example?

Do you convince them to keep the golden rule? Do you give them a ten-step program for Christian living? Paul says in verse 1, Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you. We're listening for some kind of lifestyle advice. Surely a list of do's and don'ts, or at the very least an example to follow. Here it comes, verse 3.

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

[7 : 59] Is that it? That's not an example to follow. That's not a list of do's and don'ts. That's not advice on how to live. What is this message that these sophisticated, educated, dissolute Corinthians received, on which they took their stand and by which they were being saved?

What is it that Paul describes as of first importance? Four real events that have happened in history. Jesus Christ died.

Jesus Christ was buried. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Jesus Christ appeared after his resurrection to many witnesses. He was buried.

And the theory goes that he simply lost consciousness due to loss of blood and then in the peace and quietness of the tomb he slowly revived until he was able to stagger out.

No, says Paul, he died. Prove it, he was buried. Think about it. You don't bury anybody who's alive.

[9 : 36] And the men who buried him, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, they were Jesus' own followers. And if there'd been the slightest gasp of breath, the faintest flicker of a pulse, these men would have taken him home and summoned the best doctor in Jerusalem.

You know, in three, in almost ten years of working as a GP, I've often been called to confirm that someone has died. But you know what?

I've never once been asked to go to confirm a death and got there to find that the person was still alive. You know, often the family has never seen anyone die before and they ring up and they say, Doctor, I think they've just died.

But they've always been right. It's not that difficult to tell when someone has died. Now both Mark and Luke state explicitly that Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross.

Mark 15, 46 says, And Joseph bought a linen shroud and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud. Luke 23, 53 says, Then he took it down, referring to Jesus, and wrapped it in a linen shroud.

[11 : 06] You can't take a man down from a cross without knowing that he's dead. You can't wrap him in a shroud without knowing that he's dead. You can't carry him through the streets of Jerusalem to the tomb without knowing that he's dead.

They knew that he was dead and so they buried him. Jesus Christ died. Prove it. He was buried.

But Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Prove it. Verse 5, 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, and then to all the apostles. To Cephas, to the twelve, two more than five hundred brothers. He appeared to them.

He didn't appear in them. He appeared to them. It wasn't that he lived on in them. It wasn't that he lived on in their memories. It wasn't that he lived on in their hearts.

[12 : 16] He appeared to them in a body. And he didn't appear to everyone. He appeared to witnesses. It wasn't a spiritual experience of the reality of the resurrection that every Christian could have.

This large but limited number of people were eyewitnesses of his physical, historical, resurrected body. And look what Paul says in verse 6.

Most of whom are still alive. And the implication of Paul's words is, are you unsure? Do you doubt? Do you wonder if it's really, really true?

Well, go and ask them. I'm writing this in AD 50. It's only about 20 years since these events. Most of them are still alive.

And they'll be happy to tell you. Ask Cephas, that's Peter. He'll tell you how he appeared to him, to him alone, Peter who had denied him.

[13 : 18] Ask any of the twelve disciples. They'll tell you how Jesus appeared to them in the upper room by the Sea of Galilee on the Mount of Olives. Ask those 500 brothers who saw him all at the same time.

Ask Jesus brother James. Ask any of the other disciples. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Prove it.

He appeared to the eyewitnesses. Four real historical events. Jesus Christ died. Jesus Christ was buried. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Jesus Christ was seen after his resurrection by many witnesses. No advice. No ten step plan. No example to follow. This is what the Corinthians received.

This is what they took their stand on. And this is what they were being saved by. Tonight, God doesn't ask you to receive a fairy tale. God doesn't ask you to take your stand on your feelings.

[14 : 26] God doesn't ask you to be saved by taking good advice. God asks you to receive, to take your stand and be saved on these real historical events.

It's news, not advice. Second, Christianity isn't news, isn't just news, it's good news. What makes news of these historical events good news?

What makes the death of a Jewish carpenter 2,000 years ago good news? And if he did rise from the dead, what makes that so important? Of course, if it's true, it's news, but what makes it good news, or what makes it news that's relevant to you, here and now, in 2011?

Now, if I were to tell you that my great-grandfather died in 1917, that would be news to you. If I were to tell you that he died age 40, leaving a widow and ten children, that would be tragic news.

But if I were to tell you that he died fighting in the Battle of Ypres during the First World War, then that context gives his death meaning, and in some small way, makes it significant to all of us tonight.

[15 : 48] After all, in the words of Maxwell Edmund's famous epitaph for the fallen, for their tomorrow we gave our today. Now, if Paul were to tell us that Jesus died round about 30 AD, that would be news.

If Paul were to tell us that he died age 30, age 33, victim of a miscarriage of justice, that would be tragic news. But when Paul tells us that he died for our sins, then that context gives his death meaning, and makes it enormously significant to all of us here tonight, and that is what makes it good news.

Paul doesn't say in verses 3 to 5 that Christ died, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, that he appeared to Cephas then to the twelve.

No, he says something entirely different, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he appeared on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas then to the twelve, and that is what makes it good news.

He died for our sins, his death was in accordance with the scriptures, his resurrection was in accordance with the scriptures, and when around 50 AD Paul says in accordance with the

scriptures, he doesn't mean the Bible in the pew tonight, he means the Old Testament.

[17 : 31] But how are these four historical events in accordance with the Old Testament? perhaps you've always thought that the Bible was just a dry dusty old book of rules, and the driest, dustiest part of all was the Old Testament.

Well, it's not a book of rules. The Bible is a story. The Bible is the story. The Bible is the story that tells us the truth about who we are, why we're here and where we're going.

The Bible is a drama that begins with the words let there be light as the creator God makes this world out of nothing. The Bible is a story that tells us what's gone wrong with the world.

Adam, head of the human race, declared independence from the God who made him and set off a chain of events that made this world what it is. Man in a broken relationship with God, man in a broken relationship with other members of the human race, man in a broken relationship with the world round about him.

But the Old Testament tells us what God is going to do to reverse the fall and return this world to the glory and splendor that he'd always intended it to have.

[18 : 57] Remember the Old Testament worship that revolves around the temple where the priests offered sacrifice after sacrifice to atone for sin.

Well the Old Testament said that one day God would send someone who would be the ultimate sacrifice, someone who would reverse the effects of the fall and someone who would finally bring us back into a right relationship with God.

And the prophet Isaiah wrote, not of a bull or a goat or a lamb but of a man. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

And these historical events are good news because Jesus is that man. Jesus is that sacrifice. Jesus is that Messiah.

[19 : 59] And these historical events are the climax of the story, the chapter the world had been waiting for. And that's the basic content of every sermon preached by the apostles in Acts.

Jesus is that man. Jesus is that sacrifice. Jesus is that Messiah. And his untimely death and resurrection weren't just a miscarriage of justice.

but were in fact central to his very mission. You know Peter told the crowds in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, this man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge.

And you, with the health of wicked men, put him to death by kneeling him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead.

And these events, his death, his burial, his resurrection, are the climax of the story the Bible has been telling since Genesis. They are in accordance with the scriptures.

[21 : 06] But then Paul goes on to say, Christ died for our sins. How do you react to Paul's words? Christ died for our sins.

Do you react with relief and joy? No, perhaps not. Perhaps you find them strange. Perhaps you find them meaningless.

Perhaps you find them even offensive. Christ died for our sins. Perhaps you don't know the scriptures. Perhaps you don't know the story. Perhaps you don't know the danger that you're in.

that young American soldier knew he was facing certain death on the beaches of Japan. And that's why the news that the war was over, finally over, brought him such relief and joy.

we're all characters in the Bible story. We're all members of the human race that has rejected the rule of our creator God. And instead we've sought to be masters of our own fate and captains of our own souls.

[22 : 16] And the Bible story tells us that our sin, that our rebellion against the God who made us and to whom we owe everything, will one day bring God's judgment on us.

And when God finally brings the curtain of history down on the stage of this world, he is going to bring final justice. In his famous sermon in Athens in Acts 17, Paul said, In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent.

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

And that will be the penultimate chapter of the one true story, the great narrative of this world. The journalist Peter Hitchens was once a confirmed atheist.

priest. But several years ago, he was on a gastronomic tour of France when he stopped by an old church to look at a famous painting by the medieval artist van der Weyden.

[23 : 43] And this painting was called The Last Judgment. And Hitchens writes, I peered at the naked figures fleeing toward the pit of hell, out of my usual faintly morbid interest in the alleged terrors of damnation.

But this time, I gaped, my mouth actually hanging open. These people did not appear remote or from the ancient past.

They were my own generation. They were me and the people I knew. One of them, and I've always wondered how the painter thought of it, is actually vomiting with fear and shock at the sound of the last trumpet.

I stood in front of van der Weyden's great altarpiece and trembled. Fear is good for us and helps us escape from great dangers. Those who do not feel it are in permanent peril because they cannot see the risks that lie at their feet.

And that is the context that makes those words, Christ died for our sins, bring such relief and great joy. For Judgment Day for Christians has come and gone, never ever to be repeated again.

[25 : 03] Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. On that day, at that time, in that place in history, God's judgment for his people's sin was poured out on Jesus.

For God treated Christ as we deserved, so that today he can treat us as Christ deserved. and he was raised again the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death and that's why we die. We're sinners. We're under God's curse. But Jesus had no sin.

He alone lived a perfect life, keeping God's law every day of his life, fully pleasing God every hour, every minute of his existence. But the sins of God's people were charged to his account.

He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. And he became accursed. He suffered God's wrath and he died.

[26 : 13] But he couldn't stay dead. He had completely exhausted God's wrath for his people's sin. He had completely discharged our debt. He had made complete atonement.

And when you see the relationship between sin and death, then you understand why the resurrection was inevitable. With the price of his people's sin completely paid, the account was settled, the debt was discharged, and death could no longer hold him.

That's why Peter says on the day of Pentecost, but God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Impossible for death to keep its hold on him. And in the words of Lyrie's great Easter hymn, death cannot keep its prey, Jesus my Saviour.

He tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord. Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes. He died for our sins.

[27 : 24] His death was in accordance with the scriptures. His resurrection was in accordance with the scriptures. It's not just news, it's good news.

And so to our final point, Christianity is good news with the power to change us forever. Paul goes on to tell us in verse 8 to 11 how these events had impacted on his life.

What was Paul before he became a Christian? Was he trying to follow Christ's teaching? Was he trying to live according to the golden rule, according to the Sermon on the Mount? Was he trying hard to follow Christ's example?

Well, of course not. In Luke's words, Saul, or Paul, began to destroy the church, going from house to house. He dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Or in the words of Ananias, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he's done to the saints in Jerusalem. Or in the words of Paul himself, I persecuted the church of God.

[28 : 37] Paul had no moral record to oblige God to accept him. In fact, it was the very opposite. Paul even described himself as the chief of sinners.

And yet Paul writes in verse 8, Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. And on the Damascus road, on his way to persecute the Christians of Damascus, Saul of Tarsus became the final witness of the risen Christ.

Christ. You know those other disciples who had come to know Jesus over three years of his ministry? They followed him, they listened to him, and they watched him.

They were there in the upper room when Jesus took the bread and said, this is my body that's given for you. They were there in Gethsemane as he prayed, and they'd watched him being arrested. At least some of them had stood by the cross and watched him die, and they were among the first to see him again when he rose from the dead. You could misunderstand the Bible and come to the conclusion that the other disciples earned their status as Christians and apostles.

[29 : 58] After all, hadn't they left their homes and their jobs and their families to come follow Jesus? But you can't misunderstand what happened to Paul.

I was untimely born, he says. It was unexpected. I came to know the risen Christ suddenly, unexpectedly, in a moment, and come into terms with that real historical fact that Jesus Christ wasn't dead, but had risen from the dead, changed me forever.

It was good news, and I'm changed. Paul uses one word three times in verses 10 and 11. It's the word grace.

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.

you're not going to be a witness of the resurrection in the same way that Paul was. The risen Christ is not going to appear to you, and the Bible never suggests that you're going to have a sudden startling Damascus road experience like Paul.

[31 : 22] But like the Corinthians, you are to receive, to take your stand on, and be saved by this real event in history.

Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that is grace. When you're saved by an event that's taken place in the past, not by your own lifetime of good works, then that's grace. When God accepts you, not because of your moral record, but because of Christ, then that's grace. When you're saved from God's judgment, not because you're a good person, but because Christ has been punished on your behalf, then that's grace.

The Bible is telling a story of grace from Genesis all the way through to Revelation. God entered history in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ lived the life that we should have lived.

Jesus Christ died the death we should have died, so that he can accept us and forgive us. And that is grace. Grace makes you realize that there's nothing that you can do that's enough to wipe out your debts with God.

[32 : 36] But grace will open your eyes to see what Jesus Christ has done for you. Grace tells you that you're more sinful than you ever imagined. But grace tells you that you're more loved than you ever dreamed.

Grace will enter your life in a moment and grace will change you for eternity. eternity. And every Christian has to say with Paul, but by the grace of God, I am what I am.

But then there's a surprise. In verse 10, Paul says, on the contrary, I worked harder. Does that surprise you?

I thought grace meant you didn't have to work. You can't work to make up for your sins. You can't work to make yourselves right before God. What does Paul mean by saying I worked harder?

Tim Keller wrote about a woman who came to tell him that she found the Christian gospel scary. And she said this, if I was saved by my good works, then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through.

[33 : 45] I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I'm a sinner saved by sheer grace, then there's nothing he cannot ask of me.

You know, she hit the nail right on the head. If I am a sinner saved by sheer grace, then there's nothing he cannot ask of me. I worked harder than them all, says Paul.

Or as Isaac Watts put it, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

When you receive and take your stand on these real historical events, grace will change your life forever. Conclusion then, some of the older members of our congregation might remember Tom Allen.

He was ministered here in the 1950s and 60s. And in a radio interview he described the point in his life when these real historical events became to him good news and changed his life forever.

[35 : 00] It was 1945. He was serving with the RAF in France and on Easter day he attended a service led by an American chaplain. And at one point during the service, an African American sang the Negro Spiritual Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Tom Allen said, I realized for the first time that day that Christ had died for me. Were you there? How could I be there? This had happened 2,000 years ago. But that spiritual had gone right to the heart of Christian truth and reminded us of the fact that we're all involved in the death of Christ. And I remember thinking that if my hands had helped to crucify him, then also I was there when he prayed, Father, forgive them. I was involved in Calvary and I was involved also in the forgiveness of God through Christ. News of these real historical events is good news with the power to change us forever. may you receive it, take your stand on it, be saved by it and hold it fast. Let's pray together. Father we thank you tonight for your grace to an undeserving world to sinners like us we thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for our sakes he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich Father we thank you for these historical events that assure us of your love and your forgiveness may tonight we all find ourselves standing sure and firm on these events as we pray in Jesus name Amen