

We have a Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you would have your Bibles open, please, at page 961, we'll have a moment of prayer together. God our Father, we ask that we may have the experience this evening of your two disciples who trudged along the road to Emmaus, defeated and disillusioned, and then you appeared and opened your word to them.

Amen. We pray that our eyes may be opened, that our hearts may burn within us, that we may be sent out into the world with the message that the Lord is risen.

We pray that as we draw near to you, you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts, and that you will open our hearts to your word.

Amen. Now, the title for this little series on 1 Corinthians 15 is taken from a wayside pulpit that was outside Holyrood Abbey Church some 25 years ago when I was a theology student there.

It's a poster I've always remembered because it seems to me to be so powerfully encapsulate the message of the Gospel. After Easter, always Easter.

[1 : 2 8] That was the message, and that's the title for this little series on 1 Corinthians 15. After Easter, always Easter. It's very interesting.

When you read 1 Corinthians, Paul begins by saying he is going to preach nothing but the word of the cross, nothing but Christ and him crucified. You will look in vain throughout the letter for an exposition of the cross.

What we do have is an exposition of the resurrection. And surely, that doesn't mean Paul has changed his mind so much as the word of the cross and the word of the resurrection so much belong together that it's impossible to preach the one without the other.

In other words, we don't need to wait until Easter Sunday to celebrate the fact that Christ has risen. Christ has risen, and because Christ has risen, we have a Gospel to proclaim.

So we're going to look at this chapter together, the word of the cross and the word of the resurrection. Just a couple of introductory points. How does this relate to the whole letter, 1 Corinthians?

[2 : 3 6] Now, don't worry, I'm not going to give an exposition of chapters 1 to 14. Nevertheless, it's rather important that we see the chapter in context. The whole letter of 1 Corinthians deals with a series of problems that had arisen in the church at Corinth.

And clearly, correspondence had passed between Paul and the church, including a letter to Paul from the church, which we don't have. It's been lost.

And in this letter, Paul is frequently answering questions which have been raised by the Corinthians. And the church in Corinth has a pretty impressive array of problems.

Personality cults. Some people denigrating Paul, other people putting him on a pedestal, Peter, Apollos, and others. And the super spiritual saying, oh, I belong to Christ as if no one else did.

Personality cults. Sexual sinfulness, which he deals with in the middle section of the letter. Behavior when meeting together, particularly when celebrating the Lord's Supper.

[3 : 42] The gifts of the Spirit. And now, the very heart of their faith. The word of the cross. The word of the resurrection. Christ crucified and risen. Now, most of the Corinthian problems flowed from one thing.

A kind of unbiblical, what we might call, dualism. The idea that the body is evil. The body is disposable. After death, you leave it behind and go into some kind of spiritual state.

Now, you can see how that lies behind those sexual sins. If we're going to lose the body at death, then of course it doesn't matter how we treat it now. Or what we do with it. Or with anybody else's for that matter.

And it also lies behind, I believe, that great text of 1 Corinthians 13. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, some of the Corinthians were claiming to have experienced on earth what can only be experienced in heaven.

In other words, they're already speaking in the tongues of angels. They don't need a resurrection because they're already there. They've already got it all. And of course, the idea of bodily resurrection is totally unpalatable.

[4 : 49] Unpalatable to these people. The body we leave behind. And Paul is insisting. Look, if you're going to be involved in the resurrection, you're going to have to have a body. And we'll see this as we go through the chapter.

And later on in Philippians, he is going to say, what is the goal of our Christian living? He says, we wait for a saviour from heaven. The Lord Jesus Christ will change our lowly bodies and make them like his glorious body.

The authorised version has misled people in that passage by saying, we'll change our vile bodies. Our bodies are not vile. Our bodies are sinful. Our bodies are fallen.

But they are to be redeemed. And that is to be the goal of, not the immortality of a soul, but the resurrection of the body. We have a gospel to proclaim.

Now I'd remind you, brothers, he says, the gospel I preach to you. Notice the order of events here. Look at verse 3.

[5 : 58] I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received. Paul did not make up this gospel. He received it. Then he preached it.

And through that preaching, people were saved. That is the pattern. We receive the gospel. We preach it. And people are converted. That was the pattern then. And that is the pattern now.

How did Paul receive it? Well, he received it on the Damascus Road when he met the risen Jesus. And his first mentor was Ananias, who explained to him the reality behind the events.

Then we learn from Galatians 1 that he received it from the Lord himself in Arabia. And he went to Arabia to reflect on that experience. And then we learn that he talked with Peter in Antioch.

We must presume they didn't just talk about the weather, but they discussed this glorious gospel. We have a gospel. So let's look at it then. What is this gospel?

[7 : 00] There are three things here I want us to notice. First of all, the facts. Paul presents to us the facts of the gospel. Then he presents to us the interpretation of these facts.

And finally, he gives us the evidence for them. So facts, interpretation, and evidence. That's what we're going to look at in these 11 verses. Because these are of first importance.

Verse 3. I deliver to you as of first importance. Christ died. Christ was buried. Christ was raised. Christ was raised. Now, that doesn't mean that every sermon has to be about the cross and the resurrection.

What it does mean, and we'll come to this later, is that the whole Bible, the whole canon, is cross and resurrection shaped. You can trace this through the whole of the Old Testament.

The central theme of history is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just as something that happened, but as something which the whole Bible bears witness to.

[8 : 06] All flows from it. All flows to it. Rather like an hourglass where we have the whole of Old Testament history narrowing down to one person.

And then stretching out to fill the whole world. So the facts, first of all, are historical realities. Three facts. Christ died. Christ was buried.

Christ was raised on the third day. It's not just a wonderful idea. It's not just an experience. You know the old Gospel hymn, You ask me how I know He lives.

He lives within my heart. That's not good enough. I need to know that He lives outside my heart as well. That He reigns in heaven and earth.

That's great for my heart is rejoicing. Or what about when, as one of the Easter hymns puts it, For my heart is wintry, grieving and in pain. I need to know the objective fact that Christ is risen.

[9 : 05] That He is Lord. That He reigns in heaven and earth. And it does not depend either on my good feelings or my bad feelings. It's not enough simply to say it's an experience.

It is a reality. It's a series of events. Christ died. Christ died. The Jewish Messiah prophesied, who is the Savior of the world, gave His life.

All drawing from Isaiah 53 and so on. That is an event, a fact, which was witnessed, which was seen, which was real. But notice the second event.

He was buried. Read the Gospel accounts of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each of them have a section on Jesus' burial. And that's so important.

Because it means that He was really dead. It means there was no question. One of the theories that grew up after the Enlightenment was that Jesus merely swooned and revived in the cool of the tomb.

[10 : 04] He was taken from it by His disciples and somehow or other managed to convince them that He was Lord of life. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that Jesus was buried.

The stone was rolled against the tomb. Can you imagine the bleakness of the day that comes between Good Friday and Easter Sunday?

The day to which we haven't given a name. The day when the endless hours dragged along and Jesus' friends wondered, hoped, prayed, but had no certainty that He was going to rise again.

You can pick this up in the stories of the resurrection. On the Emmaus Road, we trusted that He would have been the one. You can sense the agony, the despair there.

And then comes another historical event. Notice a little detail. He was raised on the third day. Not in other words, some vague event.

[11 : 06] A common view of the resurrection is it was the rise of Easter faith in the hearts of the disciples. That's not what Scripture says. Scripture says it was a dateable, specific event.

He died. He was buried. And on the third day, another event happened which changed everything. He was raised. And a whole number of witnesses, Paul says, saw the risen Lord.

And last of all, he says, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me. Very important, this last of all. Paul is saying something here that we could easily miss.

Paul is an apostle. He is part of the foundation of the church, the prophets and the apostles. There are to be no more apostles. What we are going to have, though, is the apostolic gospel.

There will be no more apostles. Last of all, he appeared to Paul. But we have the same gospel. We have a gospel to proclaim. And the other thing to notice is, this is one of the earliest accounts of the facts of the resurrection.

[12 : 15] None of the books we call gospels had yet been written, probably. This is some 15 to 20 years after the great saving events themselves. This is the kind of thing that was being preached around the Mediterranean in the early church.

And later on, each of the four gospels are to write their own accounts from different perspectives. But telling the same story with its historical accuracy and its life-changing events.

So that's where we have to begin. That these are events. These are facts which happened. They were true then. They are true now. And they will be true eternally.

We have a gospel to proclaim good news for all throughout the earth. And it's based on these historical facts over those three days in Jerusalem. Around about A.D. 30, Christ died.

He was buried. And on the third day, he rose again. That is the gospel. That is the gospel that changes lives. That is the gospel that transforms. That is the gospel that is true.

[13 : 20] But secondly, the interpretation. The facts in themselves don't amount to a gospel. Christ died. Why did he die? Did he die as a martyr?

Because if he died as a martyr, there's no gospel there. Nor is there any shrine to him. Did he die as a political agitator? Well, he founded no political party.

And there seems to be nothing flowed from his death. Paul says, Christ died and the reason he died was for our sins. And that turns the fact into a gospel.

Later on, Paul is to say in Romans, Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification. These facts are life-changing facts because they deal with our sin.

And Paul says, this God planned long ago. In a moment or two, we're going to look more closely at the phrase in accordance with the scriptures.

[14 : 25] I want to say now that in one sense, the Old Testament is a vast series of visual aids of the gospel. All these sacrifices in books like Leviticus are acted parables of our sinfulness.

And you study a book like that, you see different aspects of our sinfulness to which are applied, if you like, different aspects of the grace and love of God.

Dealing with our sins, dealing with our guilt, dealing with our fallenness, dealing with the fact that we are under the anger of God. All these sacrifices pointing forward. The thing we must always remember is that people in Old Testament times were not saved by works.

Hebrews 11, by faith Noah, by faith Abraham, by faith Moses. The death of Christ happening at a specific time and place, yet has eternal consequences.

Just as Christ can save those of us who live thousands of years after his death, so that same death can save those who live thousands of years before him. That's what Peter says in his first letter.

[15 : 36] Peter calls Jesus the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world. And someone has said, I don't know who said it, Before ever there was a sinner on earth, there was a Saviour in heaven.

What Christ did on Calvary, what happened when he was buried and raised again, was the fulfilment of the eternal purposes of God.

And the other thing which I've already alluded to is these facts lead to change. The interpretation of these facts. Paul's not just giving a lecture on biblical theology.

He's not simply telling us systematically what happened when Christ died. And that's why he uses the word preaching. So, I preach to you. You're received.

In which you stand, verse 1. And by which you are being saved. If you hold fast to the word I preach to you. Unless you believed in vain. Paul has already said in chapter 1, It pleased God by the foolishness of what was preached.

[16 : 41] To save those who believed. And this preaching is God's appointed way to make the gospel plain. It's terribly important to realise this.

The gospel word, the word of the cross and the resurrection, is not something that's accompanied by the power of God. It is itself the power of God.

That's why the gospel word does not need to be accompanied by signs and wonders for it to be effective. It is the word itself. The life-giving word. Peter again says, You were born, not by corruptible seed, but by the living seed of the word of God.

And he illustrates this from his own experience in verses 9 and following. He says, I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

The former persecutor becomes an apostle. And like that later convert John Newton, he preached the faith which he once destroyed.

[17 : 46] And notice the phrase that he uses. It is not in vain. Twice he uses it in verse 2, unless you believed in vain. And then he uses it again in verse 10, in vain.

And he used to use it again at the end of the chapter in verse 58. This is the word, the Greek version of the word that appears in Ecclesiastes.

And I know you're studying Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings. This is the word hevel, which means emptiness, a puff of wind. Paul is saying, because of the word of the cross and the resurrection, because of that message that's based on these historical facts, that revelation in the middle of time of God's grace and love, nothing is in vain.

It's not meaningless any longer. The gospel works. The gospel is life changing. And don't misunderstand what he says at the end of verse 10. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them.

He's not saying, he's not saying I worked hard, and therefore God rewarded me. Look what he goes on to say. It was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

[18 : 59] This gospel is life changing. This gospel changed the great persecutor into the great apostle. So we have the facts. Christ died.

Christ was buried. Christ was raised on the third day. These facts are interpreted. They weren't just a historical event, which happened to come along the stream of history.

This was God's plan, so that he could save us from our sins. But then look at the evidence now. Twice, he says, in verses 3 and 4, in accordance with the scriptures.

It's very interesting, isn't it? It's, let's see what Paul is saying here. Paul is speaking with the same voice as the rest of the New Testament.

Remember when the risen Lord appears on the road to Emmaus, he doesn't say to the disciples, you don't need the Bible now, you've got me. Rather, what does he do? He unfolds to them in the scriptures the things about himself.

[20 : 04] He says to them, if you want to understand the events of these three days, the death, the burial, and the resurrection, you've got to read the scriptures. And at that time, of course, the New Testament had not yet been written.

It's all there in the scriptures. And interestingly, in 2 Peter, in Peter's second letter, some probably just weeks before his death, he speaks about, we heard a voice from heaven on the holy mountain.

Interesting, that voice from heaven is quoting the Old Testament. It's quoting Psalm 2, and it's quoting Isaiah 42, basically saying, do you see this man being baptized in the Jordan?

This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. This is what history is about. There's an old and ridiculous rhyme that says, shut your Bibles up, and tell us how the Christ you speak about is living now.

Well, the surest way not to demonstrate that the Christ we speak about is living now is to shut our Bibles. And the surest way to show that he is living now is to open our Bibles.

[21 : 11] Because it is in Scripture, by the power of the Spirit, that the living Christ comes to us, changes us, presents himself to us. The Bible is inexhaustible. The Gospel is inexhaustible.

Because it faithfully presents the living Word himself. Because if we wouldn't have the Bible, Christ Jesus would simply become a projection of our own prejudices and fantasies.

And if you find the many inadequate Christ that have been presented across the centuries, Christ the martyr, Christ the political agitator, Christ the pale Galilean, Christ the liberal Protestant whom no one would ever have bothered to crucify, a nice little man who went around talking platitudes, when you see all these inadequate Christ have come because people have shut their Bibles rather than opened them.

So then, what does Paul mean when he says in accordance with the Scriptures? I think it's very important to realize he means all the Scriptures. It is the pattern of the Bible.

He doesn't say Christ died for our sins according to Isaiah 53 and that he was raised from the dead in accordance with Job 19 although these are both very important passages.

[22 : 24] He says, go back to the Scriptures and there you will trace the whole pattern. And where do you begin? You begin in Genesis 1 and 2. If any Cornhill students present, they've heard this ad nauseam but it will do them no harm or anyone else to hear it again.

If you want to understand the God of the Bible then you must engage with Genesis 1 and 2. The God of Genesis 1 awesome, distant, someone before whose face we fall down and worship whom we cannot understand and yet who speaks and reveals himself.

The God of Genesis 2, the God who comes right down into our human story. The God who one day is going to take flesh and become one of us. There already is the Gospel.

The God from up there who comes down here. As Jesus says, particularly in John's Gospel, I came, that's the God of Genesis 1 and I was sent, the God of Genesis 2.

And then we have the fall and the promise of the descendant of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. The pattern of going down into death as the people of Israel went into Egypt, then coming back to life if you like, taken out of Egypt across the Red Sea, going down into exile and coming back again to new life as they were led back to rebuild their city and their temple.

[23 : 48] See, the whole pattern of the Bible is cross-shaped and resurrection-shaped. It's not, in other words, the cross and the resurrection are not just another event that happened.

This is what the big picture is about. This is what the big picture leads to and this is where it's most clearly seen. So it is the pattern of Scripture itself, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But it's also the pattern of our preaching. Verse 2 again, If you hold fast to the word I preached to you. When we preach the Bible, we preach Christ himself.

As Wesley said, I offered Christ to them because ultimately that is all we have to offer to the world and indeed that is all we need to offer to the world.

unless he says you believed in vain. Notice the words here, you are being saved, hold fast, unless you believed in vain. This being saved, sometimes called the three tenses of salvation, saved, indeed saved in eternity, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, which manifests itself as Jesus died at Calvary.

[25 : 04] Being saved day by day and then finally to be saved on the last day when Christ returns. Hold fast. It's terribly important that we don't lose our grip on the gospel.

If we lose our grip on the gospel, we lose our grip on the only thing we have that will transform lives. The only thing we will have that will build the church and convert the world is the word of the cross and the resurrection.

And believed. Believing is not simply an intellectual asset. after all, James tells us the devils believe and tremble. The theology of the devil is utterly orthodox.

He knows and he trembles as he knows the truth of the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this believing is something that involves the whole person.

In the next two weeks we're going to go on to see how this involves all of us, not just our minds, but our whole personalities. So this chapter, as we come to the end this evening, this chapter is telling us, Paul is telling us that we do have a gospel, telling us to be confident in that gospel.

[26 : 19] It's terribly easy to lose confidence in the gospel, isn't it? It seems so ineffective. Some guy standing up and speaking words, it seems so ineffective, so unreal and unrelated.

And yet we believe when these words are spoken in the power of the Spirit, in faithfulness to Scripture, that Christ himself comes through his word.

So let's have confidence in the gospel. Let's reject all the calls to abandon the gospel and try something else. Because it won't work.

Only the gospel will change people. only the gospel will make people into the likeness of Christ. And the second thing we'll come back to this and particularly in the final study is Paul's phrase, it is not in vain.

We live in a world which is dominated by this feeling of, some temporary people call it angst and so on, this feeling of lostness, of alienation.

[27 : 25] And we feel it as Christians as well of course, because we are part of the fallenness of this world. But into this world of alienation, into this world of angst and uncertainty comes the word of the cross.

That word which will not only save us, but will keep on saving us. And one day God will be going to good work in us will present the fullness of that work.

So let's believe. Let's continue holding fast. Let's continue preaching that gospel and believing in it. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we praise you that we have a gospel to proclaim.

We thank you that over the many centuries, over the whole face of the earth, lives have been changed. People have been transformed. the word of the cross and the resurrection has broken down strongholds, broken down barriers.

Give to us in our day increasing confidence in that gospel. Give to us an increasing desire and conviction that it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

[28 : 43] And help us to be faithful, believing that he who has begun a good work in us will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.