

INTRODUCTION

The church at Corinth had three major problems. The first problem was the problem of immortality, a problem of sexual sin in the church. The second problem was the problem of immaturity. They were very immature when it came to spiritual gifts. And the third problem they had was the problem of immortality. They didn't understand what happens to a Christian after they died. They didn't understand the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. And so chapter 15 is devoted to that third problem. It is the greatest chapter in the Bible that deals with the resurrection of the bodies of Christians. Many passages talk about the resurrection of Jesus, and this does also, but this chapter also deals with the resurrection of our own bodies after we die.

First Corinthians 15:1-11 says:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

During the time that the apostle Paul was writing, there were three popular world philosophies. First of all was the philosophy of hedonism. And hedonism was a philosophy based on pleasure. And the philosophy of the hedonist said, “Hey, you only go through life once. So you might as well grab for all the fun you can get. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. There's nothing after death so you might as well live it up right now.” And there are a lot of people today that live that way. The second philosophy was pantheism, someone who believes that God is in everything. God is in this pulpit, and God is in this carpet. And God is in these

people, and God is in that tree over there. And God's in that rock. And God's in that star. There are a lot of pantheists today in America, but you know what they're called? They're called New Agers. There's nothing new about the New Age religion; it is just old pantheism. And so the pantheist said that when a person dies, they merged with God. The third popular philosophy was based on Plato. Plato was one of the first ones who taught the immortality of the soul. But Plato taught that our soul always existed and will always exist...whether you're good, you're bad, you're indifferent. And Plato taught that when a person dies, their body crumbles and decays in the ground, but their soul lives on forever and ever. It didn't have anything to do with the body. Now, if you've ever studied New Testament doctrine, there's a group that Sunday school teachers like to talk about called the Gnostics. They believed that it didn't really matter about the body. Everything that really had truth and reality was the soul, the spirit, the invisible. Hedonism, pantheism, and Platonism were all wrong. And Paul has to come along and say, "Hey, listen, they're all wrong. The truth is that when a Christian dies, yes, their soul goes to be with the Lord. But also the body, this very body that will be buried, is going to be resurrected and become a new body. And that's the good news of the gospel." What does the word "gospel" really mean? Good news. The good news is that there is provision for the forgiveness of your sins.

I. THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

Paul says, "There's only one thing I preach. And that is the good news of Jesus Christ." He preached the gospel. You never had to wonder what Paul was going to preach on. When Paul went around preaching, he couldn't tell people to open their Bibles to John chapter 13. He couldn't say to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians four. He couldn't say to open your Bibles to Acts chapter six. The only connection he had was the Old Testament. And so it wasn't like he was preaching the new Testament like we can do today. He just constantly pounded on the gospel. He always knew what to say. I sometimes find myself at a loss for words, and I don't know what to say. It's like the story I heard of the really sharp college student who worked in the produce department a grocery store. One day this little old lady wanted to buy a half a head of lettuce. He kind of rolled his eyes and said he'd have to ask the manager. So he walked up one aisle and down the other aisle until he finally found the manager in the back corner of the store.

And he said, "Sir, there's an idiot over there that wants to buy a half a head of lettuce." He didn't realize that she had followed him step for step. But out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of that woman, and without even missing a beat, he continued, "...and this dear lady wants to buy the other half." So they sold her the lettuce and after the lady left, the manager looked at that guy and said, "You're pretty shrewd. Where are you from?" The worker said, "I'm from Minneapolis, Minnesota, where we have the greatest football teams and the ugliest women in America." The manager said, "Hey, my wife is from Minneapolis!" That

guy said, “Really? What team did she play for?” Don't you wish you could think like that? You never had to wonder what the apostle Paul was going to say. He was never at a loss for words, because he had one message. And one message only.

1 .The gospel must be received (15:1)

Paul says, “...this gospel I preached to you, which you received.” Not everyone receives the preaching of the gospel. I've been preaching long enough to know that sometimes when I preach some people receive what I say, and others, it just rolls off them like the proverbial water off of a duck's back. I can even see it happening. I can see the truth, the gospel, going forth. And for some people they just soak it in. I can see it happening. But others aren't like that.

Jesus said some people's hearts are like hard dirt. And when the seed of the word falls on that hard dirt, they don't receive it. Satan sends his distractions like birds, and the birds take the truth away. Before the gospel means anything to you, you must receive it.

2. The gospel must be believed (15:2)

It's not enough just for you to hear the gospel. You can listen to what the gospel says. You can assimilate the information and you can evaluate it, but it is not until you believe it that it takes effect in your life. May I tell you again what the Bible word “believe” means? Some think it means to give ascent to the idea that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross, was buried, and resurrected. You just believe it in your head. Just like you believe George Washington was the first president. Just like you believe two plus two is four. In the Bible, the word “believe” comes from the same root word as the words “to drink.”

When you drink something, you take it into your body and it becomes a part of you. And so when you believe on Jesus and you believe the gospel, it becomes a part of you.

II. THE POINTS OF THE GOSPEL

I remember a seminary professor was asked how many points a sermon should have. He thought for a moment said, “Well, at least one.” I've heard a few that didn't have one! But there are three points to the gospel. In geometry, any two points define a line. But when you have three points, they define a specific line. Any two points can be connected, but it takes three to really determine a true direction. And I think it's no mistake here. God is a God of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul wants to make it so simple that anyone can remember the points of the gospel.

1. His death

Paul says, “Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures.” His death means that he is our substitute. Paul didn't have the Bible, the New Testament. And so when he says Christ died according to the scriptures, he is talking about the Old

Testament. I want to show you how, according to the Old Testament scriptures, Jesus' death was predicted. It was prophesied that Christ would die for our sins in Isaiah 53:5-6. Isaiah was written 750 years before Jesus was ever born. And did you know that Isaiah 53 so clearly describes the death of Jesus on the cross that in the Jewish synagogues, they omit the reading of Isaiah 53 from their lectionary? You know why? They're afraid that Jewish people will read it and become Christians. It's pretty clear to me: "...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. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each one of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all." And look at that last verse, "the Lord has laid on him..." In the Hebrew language that verb is an intensive verb. God's not saying, "Son, I'm going to just place lightly the sins of the world upon you." It's not what it says. It is intensive it's as if God the Father crushed his Son underneath our sins.

So he died as our substitute, according to the scripture. And what does that mean? That means that here I am. I stand guilty before God, I am a sinner by nature, by choice. And because I'm a sinner, I deserve to go to hell when I die. That's what I deserve. I deserve to spend eternity separated from God in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. I really do, but Jesus Christ stepped in and he took my place. He became my substitute and he said he'd take the punishment and penalty that I deserve. And did you know when he hung on the cross, he was our substitute? Jesus, being infinite, suffered in a finite period of time what I, being finite, would have to suffer for an infinite period of time.

For three hours on the cross from noon until 3:00 PM, Jesus experienced hell for me and hell for you. And he was our substitute. That's the first point of the gospel.

2. His burial

Why is that a point of the gospel? I mean, shouldn't you just go right from the death to the resurrection, like we generally do? What is the significance of the burial? It speaks of a symbol of what happens to our sins. That's what baptism is—a symbol. When you are baptized, it is a picture of you being buried with him in baptism. And you know what happens to your sins? It's like when your sins go down into the water, you come up, but your sins stay there.

When Jesus went into the tomb and was buried, that's a picture of him taking our sins away and bearing our sins. Now you see, especially in the Early Church, it was important to stress that Jesus not only died, but he really was buried. Some were questioning if he really was dead. Maybe he just passed out. Even today there are many theories that say Jesus really didn't die. He just passed out from loss of blood, from the trauma and the pain. And they took him and put him in that cool, damp tomb. And he revived and broke out of that tomb. He really wasn't dead. He wasn't buried.

In *Christianity Today* magazine, someone published a letter from a reader who attended a very liberal church that didn't really believe in a literal resurrection of Jesus. They just believed in some kind of spiritual resurrection. They wrote: "Our pastor preached a sermon and he said that Jesus did not die. That he merely swooned on the cross and the disciples nursed him back to help again. What do you think?" The editor's answer was: "I suggest that you beat your preacher with a cat of nine tails with a hundred heavy strokes, nail him to a cross, hang him in the sun for six hours, run a spear through his heart and embalm him, put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens to him." Jesus didn't just swoon. He died. And he was buried, and that's a picture of our sins being buried.

3. His resurrection

The third point of the gospel is the resurrection. And that is our strength. Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, as the song says. Because he lives, there is hope. If Jesus didn't come back from the grave, let's close down this place. Let's burn these books. Let's quit singing about Jesus. If he didn't come back from the grave, forget it. It's all a fake, it's a fraud. But he *did* come back from the grave. We have strength to live.

III. THE PROOF OF THE GOSPEL

Paul says that the resurrection is the proof. It is the validation of the gospel.

1. The public appearances of Jesus

Jesus appeared publicly to three groups. Paul said that he appeared to the 12. Well now let's get it straight. It really wasn't 12 there that night, were there? There were only 10. Judas committed suicide. That leaves 11, and Thomas wasn't there the first Sunday night. That leaves 10. But you see the group, the group of disciples is still called the 12. That's why in Acts chapter one, one of the first things the disciples felt impressed to do was to bring that number back up to 12. And so they elected a 12th disciple Matthias. This is the only time we ever hear anything about him. I think they elected my Matthias, and I think God elected the apostle Paul. We'll find out when we get to heaven, but they're called the 12.

Paul says he also appeared to over 500 people at one time. I don't believe that 500 people could hallucinate the same thing. After he was buried, he came back and 500 people saw him at one time. Paul says another time he appeared to all the apostles. He's probably referring to the time in Galilee.

Buddhism is a religion. It has millions of adherents, but did you know that Buddha died and was buried? And he's still dead. In fact, you can go to a beautiful temple just off the coast in the Indian Ocean. You know what it's called? It's called Temple of the Tooth because legend says a tooth from the skull of Buddha is there. In fact, one of the followers of Buddha wrote when Buddha died that it was an

“utter passing away with which nothing remains.” In other words, even the followers of Buddhist said when he died, that's it. And there was nothing else.

What about Mohammed? Islam? Islam is a religion that has millions of followers around the world, but I'm going to tell you that Mohammad died. In fact, he died on June the eighth in the year 632. And at the age of 61, he was buried in Medina. And every year millions of Muslims make a holy pilgrimage to Medina to view his tomb. But when we go to Jerusalem and we go look for the tomb of Jesus, all we find is an empty hole. You can't find the corpse of Jesus. That's what makes him different. That's what proves the gospel.

2. His private appearances

Paul mentions three individuals to whom he appeared privately. In verse 5, he appeared to Peter. Peter denied Jesus, but did you know what happened at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning? Jesus told Mary to tell the disciples “and Peter” that he would meet them in Galilee. And why do you think he added “and Peter”? Peter wasn't real sure whether he was still included in the group or not. I mean, after all, he had denied Jesus. But the Bible says he appeared to Peter.

Verse 7 says Jesus appeared to James. While there are a lot of James in the Bible, most scholars believe this is referring to the half-brother of Jesus who wrote the book of James. John chapter seven tells us that while Jesus was alive, his brothers didn't even believe in him. But he appeared to his half-brother, and James later became a committed Christian and the pastor of the church at Jerusalem.

Paul then says Jesus appeared to him. When did Jesus appear to Paul? On the road to Damascus, right? Paul was persecuting the church, and suddenly there was a great shining light and Jesus appeared to Paul. And so he appeared to many people. That's the proof of the gospel.

IV. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

The first three elements: the preaching, the points, the proof of the gospel are things you can write down on paper. Those are things you can study that's doctrine. But what about the application? The power of the gospel is what Paul wrote about in Romans 1:16. “I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” And Paul says the power produces three things.

1. It produces life

Verse 8 has one of those little phrases in the New Testament that is unique. The only time it appears is in verse eight. Paul says Jesus appeared last of all “to me as one abnormally born.” The King James says born out of due season. In the Greek language, it was the word that was used to describe a natural abortion. They didn't have man-made abortions; it referred to a miscarriage, a birth that did not come to completion. That's the word. Paul is saying, “I was nothing but an aborted fetus

walking around. There was no life in me. But when I met Jesus, I had been abnormally born, but then I was born again. When I met Jesus, I found life.” There's no such thing as life outside of Jesus and life outside the good news of Jesus.

2. It produces lowliness and humility

Paul says in verse 9 that he is “the least of the apostles. I don't even deserve to be called an apostle, but by the grace of God, I am what I am.” You see the humility of Paul. He doesn't say he ought to be an apostle because he's of the tribe of Benjamin or a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He'd been a faithful Pharisee. He could have said all those things, but he said, “I don't deserve any of it.”

Once you understand the true nature of the gospel, that it is the gospel of grace, you can't brag. You can't be proud. Nobody can say, “I deserve to go to heaven. I deserve to have my sins forgiven.” Once you understand the gospel, it makes you humble. It causes lowliness of spirit, as it did in Paul.

3. It produces our labor

Once you understand the gospel, you'll work till Jesus comes. Verse 10 says Paul worked hard by the grace of God that was with him. Paul says, “It's a gospel of grace. I don't have to do anything to deserve it. I don't have to do anything to earn it. But I work harder than anybody else so I can tell others about the gospel.”

CONCLUSION

Have you received the gospel of grace? The good news that your sins can be forgiven. How many of you are sharing it with others? Paul says, “Once I accepted the gospel, then I had to turn around and share it with other people.” Let's say you knew the cure for cancer, and somebody came up to you and said, “I've just gone to the doctor and got a bad report. I have a malignancy, and the doctor says I'll probably die.” If you had the cure to cancer, would you say to that person, “Tough luck, too bad. I'm sorry to hear that.” For you to withhold the cure for cancer, you'd be killing that person by your silence and your refusal to share the cure. People all around us... your classmates, your family members, your business associates... are dying from sin sickness. And you have the cure. So work harder than anybody else to share the gospel with them.

OUTLINE

I. THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

- 1. The gospel must be received (15:1)**
- 2. The gospel must be believed (15:2)**

II. THE POINTS OF THE GOSPEL

- 1. His death**
- 2. His burial**
- 3. His resurrection**

III. THE PROOF OF THE GOSPEL

- 1. The public appearances of Jesus**
- 2. His private appearances**

IV. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

- 1. It produces life**
- 2. It produces lowliness and humility**
- 3. It produces our labor**

CONCLUSION