

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

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1 Corinthians 15:1-11

## Introduction:

The beginning of chapter 15 marks another turning point in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. I think it would be worthwhile to do a quick review of where we have been to see how Paul us got to where we are now.

Chapters 1-4 – Paul addresses some of the conflict and division that characterized the church in Corinth. The church was deeply divided into various factions who favored certain teachers over others. These are issues that have come to his attention through reports that have come to him. He also defends his apostolic ministry and message.

Chapters 5-6 – Paul had also heard reports of serious moral issues and he confronted the Corinthian believers about their attitudes toward immorality. Two specific issues – sexual immorality that was being overlooked, and the litigation that was taking place as church members were taking one another to court over various civil matters.

Chapter 7 – a major turning point, as Paul moves from addressing outside reports, to responding to specific questions that had come to him from the believers in the church in Corinth. Chapter 7 deals extensively with questions regarding marriage and singleness for believers.

Chapters 8-10 – Paul deals at length with questions regarding our Christian liberty and our rights and responsibilities as believers. He makes it clear that our liberty in Christ does not give us freedom to act in a way that harms other believers, or creates a barrier to faith for unbelievers, or leads us away from a close walk with Jesus Christ.

Chapters 11-14 – Paul covers a number of subjects, but primarily the abuse of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. They were again divided over which gifts were the most important or had the highest spiritual value. In the middle of this discourse Paul points them to a more excellent way, and that is the way of love. In chapter 13 he displays the importance, the characteristics and the permanence of love.

That brings us to chapter 15. As I said earlier, this is another major turning point in this letter. It seems as though the believers in Corinth also had some serious questions regarding the truth of the resurrection. So, Paul sets out to address some important truth about both the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of a resurrection for believers.

But before really getting into the truth of the resurrection he begins with some statements about the gospel. You see, the gospel of salvation, the good news of justification through faith, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are so intertwined, they are virtually inseparable. Without the resurrection there can be no good news. And without the promise of the gospel there would be no meaning or purpose to the truth of the resurrection.

So, that is where Paul begins. And that is where we need to begin...

## The Function of the Gospel – vv. 1-2

*Read vv. 1-2* – as I read those verses, there were five significant phrases that just jumped out at me. Together they outline the process of the gospel message as it comes to us and changes us. Paul refers to...

- the gospel I preached to you
- which you received
- in which you stand
- by which you are being saved
- if you hold fast to the word

Let's break that down a bit.

**We hear the gospel preached** – that is the first step. Unless one hears the good news about Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for sin, one can never believe. Just as Paul said in Romans 10:14 – *“But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”*

We must first hear the gospel preached.

**We receive the gospel** – the second step is to receive the message of the gospel. We must believe and obey the gospel, the good news of

justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Hearing the message accomplishes nothing unless we receive it and believe it and respond to it.

We hear the gospel, we receive the gospel, then...

**We stand firm in the gospel** – Paul said to the Corinthians, this is the gospel in which you stand. The gospel needs to take root in our life and establish us in the faith. We are called to stand firmly in the gospel truth that came to us through the preaching of the Word. Then...

**We are saved by the gospel** – the result of receiving the gospel and having a firmly grounded faith in the gospel is ultimately salvation. In fact, Paul says it is by this gospel that we are “being saved.” (*Explain briefly the concept of past, present and future aspects of our salvation.*)

We have been saved – justification; we are being saved – sanctification; we will be saved – glorification.

Paul adds a fifth step in the process...

**We persevere in the gospel** – if we hold fast to the Word...unless you believed in vain. What does Paul mean? How is it possible to believe in vain? I don't want to get sidetracked here but I think this is important – the need for perseverance in the faith. I am reminded of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. Some of the seed fell in rocky or shallow or weedy soil and never had a chance to take root. It was welcomed momentarily but there was no perseverance.

We are not talking here about losing one's salvation. We are talking about the possibility that someone may make a profession and be enthusiastic about the idea of the gospel, but never truly be saved. The evidence is in the changed life and the ongoing commitment to Christ.

I am just going to leave it at that, as we need to go on if we are ever to get through this text this morning.

## The Message of the Gospel – vv. 3-4

So, what is the gospel? What is the message of the gospel? In the next couple of verses Paul gives us a very brief synopsis of the critical parts of the gospel message. This is certainly not exhaustive, but it gives us the important elements of the good news of Christ.

*Read vv. 3-4* – The gospel message is completely wrapped up in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The good news is predicated on an understanding of the bad news. The bad news is that we are all sinners and deserving of hell – eternal punishment, forever separated from God, our Creator, because of our sin.

But the good news is that Jesus made a way for us to be reconciled to God, so that we can spend eternity with him in glory. Paul mentions three things:

1. Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures. All through the OT God's people were required to offer sacrifices as a covering for their sins. But the prophets also predicted the coming of a Messiah, who would bear the sins of mankind. The prophet Isaiah wrote in chapter 53:5-6...  
*“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*  
Just as the Scriptures foretold, Christ did come and die for our sins.
2. He was buried. For three days, Christ's body was buried in a tomb. We are not sure where Jesus' spirit was during that time, or what he did, but his death was certain and unmistakable, as he lay in that tomb. And, during the hours on the cross and the days buried in the tomb, in some way that I cannot explain, I believe that Christ suffered the eternal punishment for sin, separation from his heavenly Father.
3. He was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures. Just as the Scriptures predicted his death, so also the Scriptures predicted that he would not remain dead. In Psalm 16, David said, *“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”* And in the apostle Peter's sermon in Acts 2, he said that David was really speaking about Christ and his resurrection. The resurrection is really at the heart of the gospel – we will be looking at that much more in the coming weeks as we continue through this chapter.

So, the basic message of the gospel is that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, he was buried to suffer the punishment we deserved and that he was raised to offer us new life, eternal life.

## **The Authentication of the Gospel – vv. 5-8**

In vv. 5-8 we see the truth of the gospel, particularly the resurrection of Jesus authenticated. I'm not going to spend much time on this, only to say a couple of things. Let's just read those verses again...

First, over a period of 40 days, Christ appeared to many people, some individually, and some larger groups – as many as 500 people at one time.

Second, at the time that Paul wrote this, he points out that many or most of those individuals were still alive and could attest to the truth of his statement personally.

Third, Paul reminds us that he himself saw the risen Christ. This happened on the road to Damascus when Christ confronted him and appointed him to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

There could be no doubt about Jesus' resurrection – the heart of the Easter celebration. It was corroborated by many who witnessed it firsthand. Let's leave it there, as we need to get to the final point in my message this morning...

## **The Heart of the Gospel – vv. 9-11**

Verses 9-11, Paul uses himself to illustrate the core of the gospel message. I just called this section the heart of the gospel.

Paul begins by pointing out just how unworthy he really felt – v. 9 – least of the apostles, not even worthy to be called an apostle, because of the way he persecuted the early believers, determined that they were undermining the law of God and the ways of God. In 1 Tim. 1:15, Paul says, *"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."*

I would suggest that Paul was no more a sinner than I am, or you are. We are all under the judgment of God as sinners, worthy of condemnation.

But Paul goes on to say – *read v. 10*. Did you catch Paul's key thought? What is it that makes the difference? It is the grace of God. It is grace that is the very heart of the gospel.

The message of the gospel is that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, that he was buried to suffer the punishment we deserved, and that he was raised to offer us eternal life. That gospel—the good news—was authenticated by Christ's appearance in the days following his resurrection. But none of that would matter if it were not for grace.

It is God's amazing grace that reaches out and offers us eternal life. Paul says clearly that everything I am and everything I do is only by God's grace. And it is only because of God's grace that we continue to preach and call people to repent and believe the gospel – v. 11. It is only because of God's grace that we preach, and it is only because of God's grace that you believed.

## **Conclusion**

So, that is a very brief look at the heart of the gospel. But, the real question now, for each one of us, is this: what is your response to the message of the gospel?

The gospel is built entirely around the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He lived the perfect life that we could not live. He died the death that we deserved. He suffered the judgment that was intended for us. He was raised to life again to vindicate his sacrifice and to offer us eternal life.

And all of this is because of God's grace. By grace he offers us the life we do not deserve and cannot lay claim to. But have you received that offer of eternal life?