

**THE CERTAINTY OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION**  
**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**  
**June 4, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

We begin this morning to look at the fullest defense of the doctrine of the resurrection recorded in Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15. Resurrection may be defined as a creative act of God whereby the bodies of dead people are raised to life [Curtis Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 150]. This might sound rather simplistic to those who know Christ and the power of His resurrection. However, the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead has evoked more contempt than perhaps any other biblical doctrine. Some would outright deny a resurrection period, while others say that the resurrection is not physical, but spiritual only.

However, the Gospels and the book of Acts affirm the fact of the bodily resurrection of Christ, and Paul in this chapter sets forth the implications of Christ's resurrection for the believer. He is addressing another of the many issues that had caused disunity and division in the church at Corinth. Verse 12 reveals that some at Corinth misunderstood the hope that is attached to the resurrection of Christ. While they did not deny the truth that Christ Himself had been raised from the dead, they refused to accept His resurrection as a guarantee of their own bodily resurrection.

This skepticism can be attributed to a number of factors that we will look at next week in looking at v. 12. But regardless of the source of this skepticism, some at Corinth insisted, "there is no resurrection of the dead." It is this false belief that Paul sets out to correct in 1 Corinthians 15. He begins in these verses by going back to the fundamental truth that *Christ's bodily resurrection is essential to our understanding of salvation past, present, and future.*

**I. Christ's Resurrection Affirmed by the Gospel (15:1-4)**

Paul addresses the "**brethren**" beginning in v. 1. This lets us know that he is writing to those at Corinth who had professed faith in Jesus Christ. While some were immature at best, and others who had been of faith longer were living as if they had relatively little knowledge of the Scriptures, Paul nonetheless refers to them as "**brethren.**"

**1. The evidence of the gospel in their own lives (vv. 1-2)**

Paul writes, "**Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you.**" The KJV has "I declare unto you." What Paul declares is not something new or something different than he had already proclaimed to them. He simply reminds them of the "**gospel**" that he "**preached**" to them and "**delivered**" to them, which he says in v. 3 was "**of first importance.**" He does not specify the substance of this gospel until verse 3-4. Here he simply reminds them that he had proclaimed the gospel to them.

Further, he reminds them that they had "**received**" this gospel, that they had embraced it as true. That is why he could call them "**brethren.**" They had a saving knowledge that Christ alone was the satisfactory, substitutionary sacrifice for their sins. They understood that atonement was based upon the finished work of Christ on their behalf and His saving merits had been fully accounted to those who had "**received**" the gospel. The verb here is in the aorist tense, signifying a decisive act that had taken place in the past. Paul reminds them that they had embraced this gospel in its entirety.

Paul then adds, "**in which you also stand.**" They stood in full adherence to the truth of the gospel. Paul used the same verb in 2 Cor. 1:24 where it is translated "standing firm" in the

NAU. It was not the entire body at Corinth that denied the resurrection of the dead, only some. Paul commends those that had received the gospel and who had accepted it as foundational for their lives, even if they did not fully understand it.

And this gospel, Paul further reminds them, had a continuing saving aspect in it. **“By which also you are saved”** is in the present continuous tense. While there is a sense in which salvation is once for all, **“received,”** with all of the blessings of justification attached, there is also a progressive sense by which the believer is being saved. We refer to this as sanctification, which begins the moment one receives Christ as Lord and Savior and continues throughout their time on this earth. In justification, the believer is “declared righteous” with God, in sanctification the believer is “being made righteous” with God. In receiving Christ, one is at that moment set free from the penalty of sin, but sin still resides in the believer. In sanctification, one is being set free from the power of sin that, though forgiven, still embattles the Christian in spiritual warfare.

That is why Paul gives a very important condition in this matter, **“if you hold fast the word which I preached to you.”** Here Paul refers to the persevering life that will be evident in one who has truly **“received”** Christ. Perseverance is a result of and an evidence of genuine salvation, of true saving faith. Conversely, those who **“believed in vain”** would not persevere in the faith because their faith was not true saving faith, but a false spurious faith. In the end, they would not “stand firm” or “hold fast” the word. They would fall away.

So Paul here reminds the church at Corinth of the gospel that he had declared to them and that they had received and held fast to as a practical evidence of Christ's resurrection.

## **2. The heart of the gospel according to Scripture (vv. 3-4)**

Paul gives three essential elements of the gospel that come straight from the Word of God. These are the things that he had **“also received”** directly from God and **“delivered”** to these at Corinth.

First, **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”** It was not just any man who died. It was Jesus Christ. And His death was for a specific purpose, **“for our sins.”** Jesus alone could die for the sins of His people because He alone was uniquely qualified to be a sacrifice and substitute for sin. He alone could atone for sin and He alone could bear the wrath of God for sinners because He alone was “a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19) who “takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). There was no stain of sin in Christ. He lived a perfect life, “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). This is why it is in Christ alone that one can have life eternal and be rescued from the wrath of God. This, Paul says, is **“according to the Scriptures.”** There are many texts we could turn to this morning to see this wonderful truth. However, for the sake of time, I will simply mention a few that you might jot down and turn to on your own. **(Is. 53:1-12, fulfillment of prophecy; Jn. 1:29; Lk. 24:25-27; Jn. 3:16).**

The second essential element of the gospel is that **“He was buried.”** We often rush by this important truth, treating it as somewhat of a trivial detail. But Christ's burial is essential because it confirms both His death and His resurrection. Think about this: if Christ was buried, he really died (unless they buried Him alive, which the Roman soldiers would never have done. You remember they confirmed He was dead on the cross by not breaking His legs to speed up His death). Further, His burial required a tomb, a tomb that was found to be unoccupied after three days. So His burial serves to confirm both His death and His resurrection. While Paul does not specify that the burial of Christ was “according to the Scriptures,” he certainly implies this and

all four gospels give detailed accounts of His burial. (**Mt. 27:57-66; Mk. 15:42-47; Lk. 23:50-56; Jn. 19:31-42**).

The third essential element of the gospel is **“that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”** This brings us to the heart of Paul’s argument in chapter 15. **“Was raised”** is in the present tense, which indicates an action that occurred in the past but has lasting relevance for the present. That is, Jesus was raised from the dead and continues His life in this resurrected state. The evidence of the empty tomb emphasizes that Christ’s resurrection was a bodily resurrection. And as with His death and burial, His resurrection is attested in all four gospels (**Mt. 28:5-6; Mk. 16:5-6; Lk. 24:3-4; Jn. 20:6-8**). Jesus Himself taught that he would be raised on the third day (Mt. 16:21) and while the Old Testament does not explicitly refer to the resurrection, it is prophetically implied in numerous places (**Hos. 6:2; Jonah 1:17, which Jesus ties to His resurrection in Mt. 12:40; Is. 53:10-12**).

This is the heart of the gospel. This is the good news! And Paul says that it is **“of first importance.”** It is of primary importance because eternity is at stake. If you are here this morning and have never trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you at this moment are under the wrath of God for all eternity. You are condemned by God because you are a sinner, guilty of breaking His good and just law. And God, being a good and just God, will judge sin. His holiness demands it. There is only one way that God has provided by which you can be rescued from His wrath, and that is through His only Son, Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb who alone can atone for sin and render forgiveness for sin to the Father. Salvation is in believing the heart of the gospel, that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised by God on the third day to vindicate His death and that there is eternal life for those who trust in Christ and live in the power of his resurrection.

Lest you believe that this is some fairy tale, that the Scriptures are not true, then I invite you to notice Paul’s second proof in this text of Christ’s resurrection.

## **II. Christ’s Resurrection Affirmed by His Appearances (15:5-8)**

Not only is Christ’s resurrection affirmed by the gospel, both practically in the lives of those who trust in the saving merits of the gospel, and according to the testimony of Scripture, which should be all the evidence we need, but the resurrection is also affirmed historically by Jesus’ numerous post-resurrection and pre-ascension appearances. Paul does not list all of the appearances of Christ in this text (he does not list the appearances to the women). But he offers these appearances to show that Christ’s bodily resurrection is an indisputable fact. These appearances were not hallucinations or visions as some would say, but actual physical appearances of the resurrected Christ verified in Scripture.

### **1. Cephas/Peter (v. 5a)**

**“Cephas”** is the Aramaic name for Peter. Others verified this appearance to Peter in Luke 24:34, “The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon.” From the gospel accounts and from Paul’s testimony here we see that Peter was the first apostle to see the risen Lord. You remember that Jesus singled Peter out for this appearance by telling Mary to go and tell the disciples *and Peter* that they would see Him in Galilee (Mk. 16:7). This singling out of Peter is perhaps an act of mercy and grace on the part of Jesus. It was this same Peter who had denied Christ three times the last time He saw Him. As John MacArthur notes, “In going to Peter first, Jesus emphasized His grace. Peter had forsaken the Lord, but the Lord had not forsaken him.

Christ did not appear to Peter because Peter *deserved* to see Him most, but perhaps because Peter *needed* to see Him most" [*1 Corinthians*, 403, italics mine].

## **2. The Twelve (v. 5b)**

"**The twelve**" is a general designation given to the Apostles in the gospels. We read of this appearance in two gospels, Luke 24:36ff and John 20:19ff. The account of John is more specific as to the details concerning Thomas when Jesus first appeared on that first Easter Sunday. We know that Judas had committed suicide at this point, so he was not present. But you remember that Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the other ten apostles. He doubted and needed more proof on receiving the report from the ten. So eight days later, Jesus came and appeared to doubting Thomas, who then believes. Paul here testifies that after appearing to Peter, Jesus showed Himself to the eleven apostles.

## **3. The five hundred plus (v. 6)**

The next appearance that Paul records is not explicitly referred to in the Gospels or in Acts but probably refers to His appearance in Mt. 28:16ff that Hollis read earlier, where Jesus gives the Great Commission. Regardless of the specific occasion, Paul writes that He appeared "**to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep.**" This group would be important to Paul's argument against those who denied the future bodily resurrection of believers. As he wrote this letter some twenty years after Jesus' resurrection, there were those still alive that could verify the bodily resurrection of Christ. They were there! Others that were alive then had now "**fallen asleep.**" This is an intentional choice of words for Paul. He did not say they had died, but "**fallen asleep.**" Paul uses this phrase often concerning the death of a believer. Their death was not final, but a "**sleep**" from which they would one day be awakened, a reference to the bodily resurrection of the believer at the Lord's return. The resurrection of our Lord, as we will see in the closing verses of this chapter, defeated death not only for Him, but also for all who savingly trust in Him.

## **4. James (v. 7a)**

This James was probably the half-brother of Jesus, the author of the book of James and the leader in the church at Jerusalem. We know from John 7:5 that James initially did not believe in Christ as the Messiah. Many believe that it was this resurrection appearance of Christ that brought James to faith in Him. We know that James was in the upper room in Acts 1:13 where that little band of believers gathered together with one mind.

## **5. All the apostles (v. 7b)**

This appearance most likely refers to Jesus final appearance in Acts 1 prior to His ascension. So Paul's references to Jesus' appearances to the apostles serve as bookends to His first appearance on Easter and his final appearance in Acts 1.

## **6. Paul (v. 8)**

However, His appearance in Acts 1 was not His final appearance. Paul concludes this list of resurrection appearances with himself. "**And last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.**" We know that this appearance occurred in Acts 9 on the road to Damascus. Paul says that his birth was an untimely birth. In other words, Paul became an apostle at an unusual time, much later than the others and in an unusual way. His conversion and calling on the road

to Damascus was both sudden and startling. Paul expands on this in the third thing we see in our text.

Not only is Christ's resurrection affirmed by the gospel and by His appearances, but...

### **III. Christ's Resurrection Affirmed by Personal Testimony (15:9-11)**

Paul of all people knew the power of Christ's resurrection. Having affirmed that Christ's resurrection appearance to him was on the same level as the others, he now offers a word of personal testimony as to the power of Christ's resurrection.

#### **1. Paul's sin (v. 9)**

Paul says, **"I am the least of the apostles."** This is not a reference to inferiority, for he stood up even to the likes of Peter. It is not a reference to the timing or the way he became an apostle because Paul defends his apostolic calling in numerous places, especially to these at Corinth. No, there was a reason that Paul considered himself **"least of the apostles."**

Further, Paul states that he was not even **"fit to be called an apostle."** Paul understood the high honor attached to an apostle. The apostolate was the highest office in the church at this time. Paul attests that he was not worthy of the honor.

What was it that drove Paul to these conclusions, that he was **"least of the apostles"** and **"not fit to be called an apostle"**? He says, **"Because I persecuted the church of God."** You no doubt recall that Paul's trip to Damascus was not to fellowship with other Christians. There was perhaps no greater persecutor of Christianity than Paul. We know that he had a hand in the stoning of Stephen for proclaiming the gospel (Acts 7). This was the occasion of the scattering of the church in Jerusalem into the surrounding areas. God's gospel has always flourished most in times of persecution. What Paul and his cohorts meant for evil, God meant for good. Paul's persecution was the impetus of driving the gospel into the uttermost parts of the world. Paul's testimony was that he was totally unworthy of his apostleship because, in short, he hated both Christians and the Christ of Christianity. He was **"the chief of sinners"** (1 Tim. 1:15).

#### **2. God's grace (v. 10)**

But notice the radical change that takes place in v. 10. **"But by the grace of God I am what I am."** **"But"** denotes a stark contrast. We see it in Ephesians 2 where in the first three verses Paul describes the sinfulness of sin and the result of sin spiritually. Men are **"dead in trespasses and sins."** They are in bondage to sin and the ways of the world, content with their wickedness and spurning God as **"the children of disobedience."** This describes the life of all without Christ, enemies of God and lovers of self. Then in Eph. 2:4 Paul interjects, **"But God."** We see in 2:4-10 the richness of God's grace and mercy in salvation as it is applied to sinful men.

That is what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. The resurrected Christ appeared and spoke to Paul and Paul was never the same. The persecutor became the propagator. The rebel became regenerate. The unworthy was made worthy. How? **"But by the grace of God I am what I am."** It was not based upon his own works, which were sinful to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree, but by the grace of God that Paul became an apostle after being a persecutor. Paul says further that this grace **"did not prove vain"** because **"he labored more"** than the other apostles. Paul, the Jew of Jews and Pharisee of Pharisees, was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. You want to talk about God's ways not being our ways! And yet he does not boast in his own achievements

or even in his own salvation, but humbly professes God's grace, "**Yet not I, but the grace of God in me.**" Paul understood that he never would have turned to Christ had Christ not turned Him. He further knew that He never would have served God according to His will had God not clearly demonstrated His calling for Him by His grace. All that Paul accomplished was by God and for God.

### **Conclusion**

(1) Paul offers us a picture of how one comes to faith in Christ. The gospel is proclaimed, the gospel is received, the gospel continues to work in the life of a believer, and the believer perseveres to the end. This echoes Romans 10:14, 17, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ... So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."

(2) There is no sin that is too great for God to forgive in Christ. Paul is a perfect example of this. Just as Hitler is thought of to be the most heinous individual because of his atrocities against the Jews, so Paul was just as wicked in his actions towards Christians. "**But God...**"

(3) If the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Christ is true, then He lives today. The Bible says that He sits at the right hand of God. The Bible also says that He will come again. And when He comes to earth the second time, it will not be to seek and to save that which was lost as the first time. It will be in judgment.