

OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

by Ray C. Stedman

We are beginning this great "resurrection" chapter, the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, which is undoubtedly the climax of this letter.

In the first eleven chapters the Apostle Paul has been dealing with what we have called "the carnalities," the things concerning the flesh, the hurtful, false and divisive things that were occurring there in the church at Corinth. These same things are also present in the churches of California, therefore, the letter is very pertinent to us.

But then, beginning with Chapter 12, Paul introduced what he himself called "the spiritualities," the things concerning the spirit, what the Spirit of God has come to do in your life and in mine. The Apostle pointed out that there was:

- First an indwelling of the Spirit, whose object is to exalt and magnify the person of Jesus our Lord.
- Then there were the "gifts of the Spirit," which are imparted to every one among us so that we have a ministry of our own by which we may see God's power manifest through us individually. This is the basis for all personal ministry.
- Then that merged, in Chapter 13, with the "fruit of the Spirit," how the exercise of gifts to one another is to help us produce in our lives that amazing fruit of the Spirit, which is love and all its manifestations.
- Finally we come in this section to the ultimate truth about the Spirit, the resurrection of the body after death.

You recognize that one of the most relevant questions of our day is, "What happens after death?" A dozen books have come off the presses recently dealing with this theme. Many are speculating about it; many testimonies are being given about various experiences of those who, supposedly, have died and then come back to life again. The apostle is dealing with that very theme in this chapter. Here he brings us face to face with the great reality of life, one that is even more certain than taxes, and that is death.

You may evade paying your taxes, but you are not going to avoid growing old and ultimately dying. We may try to avoid it. I know a lot of people who are working hard at it; they are trying to cover up all the evidences of age and decay. But we have to face the fact that there is an invisible, irresistible, and inevitable process going on in every one of us right now. No matter how old, or how young, we may be, this process is slowly stealing the bloom from our cheeks, taking the spring from our steps, reducing the sharpness of our senses so we do not see quite as well or hear quite as accurately, decreasing the potency of our sexual powers, and in many ways depriving us of what we thought to be the joy of living. (I read somewhere recently that death is nature's way of saying, "It's time to slow down.")

Now, in one of the most wonderful passages in all of literature, the Apostle Paul is facing this ultimate enemy of mankind with the ultimate declaration of the good news that Jesus is victor in this area, just as in others. Paul first shows us, in the opening verses, how the resurrection of the body is part of the foundation of the Christian faith; it is an essential part of the good news of the gospel.

These are his words:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast -- 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, {1 Cor 15:1-4 RSV}

That is as far as we are going to go today, because there the apostle sets forth in very forthright, simple language the heart, the key, the element, the foundation of faith, the good news about Jesus.

There are two simple and obvious divisions. He talks about what the gospel *does*, and what the gospel *is*. Paul takes it in that order, but we are going to change it. We are going to look first at what the gospel is, because a lot of people really do not understand that.

You ask somebody, "What is the gospel?" and he will say, "Jesus died and rose again." But that is not the gospel, and that is not what Paul says is the gospel. We have to learn precisely what the gospel is, so we are going to look at that first, and then come back to what the apostle says the gospel does in our lives.

There are three elements of the gospel, according to Paul. He says, "I delivered to you as of first importance [I think that is the proper translation there. It means that which is foundational, that which is fundamental to our understanding] what I also received."

Whom did he receive it from? Well, he tells us in other places that it was from the Lord himself. Jesus appeared to him and taught him what the gospel was. He did not learn it from the other apostles; amazingly, some of the commentaries still say that. But if you read the opening words of Paul in the letter to the Galatians, he says, "I did not learn it from men, nor was I taught it by man," {cf, Gal 1:12}. The Lord himself delivered it to him, and what was delivered to Paul, by the words and lips of Jesus, he passed on to these Corinthians. They received it, they believed it, they accepted the One of whom it spoke, and thus they have become Christians.

Paul now says, here is what that word is. He reminds them of what he had preached to them:

First: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." That is the first element. Isn't it amazing that he does not mention a word about the whole life of Jesus? He passes over the marvelous birth in a cave in Bethlehem, through the silent years at Nazareth, all the journeying up and down on the hillsides of Judea and Galilee, all the marvel of his teaching and his miracles, and comes down quickly and immediately to his death. There, Paul says, that is the gospel.

That is rather startling in itself, isn't it? But that is where the gospel begins. And even here he does not simply say, "Christ died." Ask people today what the gospel is, as I have suggested, and this is often what they will say, "Well, Jesus lived and died." No, that is not the gospel. Everyone believes that Jesus died. Go to any of the modern presentations of the life of Jesus, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and some of those, and you will find they all end at the death of Jesus. Every humanistic philosophy today accepts the fact that Jesus died. But there is no good news in that. The good news is Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. That is the good news, that his death accomplished something for us. It changed us, it delivered us, it set us free. That death had great significance in the mind and heart and eyes of God, and that is the good news. As Peter puts it in his words, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree," {1 Pet 2:24 RSV}. Or, to use the words of Isaiah, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed," {Isa 53:5 KJV}.

That is the good news, that God did something for us in that marvelous event of the cross. As we contemplate the cross, and the dying of Jesus in our place, we see that the good news of it is that God takes it seriously, and he is prepared to treat us in an entirely different way than we deserve to be treated on the basis of the death of Jesus on our behalf. That is the good news. There on the cross, we are told, he dealt with our failures, he dealt with our rebellion, he dealt with our sinful, guilty lives. He did something about it so that besmirched and dark and stained past does not any longer need trouble us. It has been set aside by the death of Jesus, and with that fact we enter into hope and freedom.

Of course, without that fact, life is really hopeless. This philosophy that many people have that God is a judge

weighing up the good and the evil of life -- and if the good outweighs the evil you get in and if it does not you have to go to hell -- is not only unbiblical but it is illogical, for how could a God of holiness and justice and purity ever accept any kind of evil at all? His demands are for perfection and never anything less. He himself is perfect, and he says to us over and over again, "Be ye perfect for I am perfect." What are we going to do with a guilty past in the light of that? The answer, of course, is the good news. In the cross of Jesus, God has already dealt with that sinful past. He offers to us freely the forgiveness of sins.

The second element of the gospel, according to Paul, is that Jesus not only "died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" -- predicted, anticipated and fulfilled in the cross -- but he was also "buried." I am always startled when I read that in this passage of Scripture. Why does Paul include the burial of Jesus? Is it not enough that Jesus died and rose again? Would that not be good news enough? Well, surely the reason for it is that when his disciples came and took the body of Jesus down from the cross, it marked their acceptance of the fact of his death.

Did you ever realize how hard it was for them to accept the fact that he died? They did not want to believe it when he himself told them that was what he was going to do. They refused; they shut their minds to it. When it actually happened they went away stunned and unbelieving, agonizing and unwilling to believe that all their hopes and dreams, all they had built up in those marvelous years with him, should come crashing down and become nothing but empty hopes, empty dreams, all in ashes at their feet. But somewhere along the line some realist among them faced up to it and said, "We have got to go get his body, and bury him." Joseph of Arimathea came forward and offered a tomb, and with loving hands they took his body down from the tree. They wrapped it in grave clothes, bound it tightly, took his head and wrapped it with a separate cloth. (By the way, that answers the claims of the so-called "Shroud of Turin" as to whether it was the legitimate garment that was about Jesus. According to the Scriptures, his grave clothes came in two pieces; one was wrapped around the head and the other around the body.) They embalmed him with spices, and then they placed him in a tomb where he lay for three days and three nights. There is no question that the disciples believed that he was dead. In their minds there was no doubt about it. They could never have entertained any idea that he had merely fainted on the cross, or entered into a coma, for they themselves had performed the burial service. That is why Paul adds that here. It marked the acceptance of the disciples that Jesus was truly dead.

But the third element is, "that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." Once again he fulfilled the predictions. It was anticipated that he would die; it was equally anticipated that he would rise again from the dead. The Old Testament said so. On the third day, to the amazement of the disciples, he fulfilled all predictions. He was not merely resuscitated (that is, coming back to the life he had before), he was resurrected. That means he came back to a life he had never lived before, a real life, a glorified life, a different life, and yet in the amazing mystery of the resurrection, the same Jesus with the wounds in his body that they could touch and feel and see for themselves.

That is the story of the gospel -- three basic facts. These are not doctrines; these are not philosophies; these are not ideas that men have had about what God should be like. These are simple, hard-nosed facts that occurred in history that cannot be eliminated or evaded. There they are. These facts have changed the history of the world. Our faith does not rest upon mere philosophy but upon facts that have occurred and cannot be taken away from us.

That is the gospel as Paul gave it to the Corinthians. But there is implied in this another level of meaning which I want to briefly mention before we come to what the gospel does. All through the Scriptures you read that, not only did this happen to Jesus, but everywhere in the Word of God subsequently we learn that in some way it is expected to happen to us. That is part of the gospel too. There is a sense in which these facts about Jesus -- his death, his burial and his resurrection -- are a foreview of what is going to happen to us when we become Christians. They are a pattern, if you like, a picture of how God is going to work with us.

Something in us is going to have to die when we become Christians. Something in us can no longer go on living. It must end; it must die. As we read the Scriptures we see how many passages set this out for us. We are to "put off the old man" {Col 3:9} because it is "dead with Christ," {Col 2:20}. We learn that it is this selfish self, this god which is me, this insistence on being able to run my own life and make my own decisions and be the boss over me -- that is what has to go. Jesus himself said it. "If any man will come after me let him

deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me," {Matt 15:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23}.

So something has to die. It hurts when it happens; we do not like it. It disturbs our ego; it undermines some degree of our self-confidence. Yet it keeps happening all the time, doesn't it? Every Christian learns this. You are involved in a process that keeps occurring again and again where something in you is being put to death and you have to give it up. You do not like it, I do not like it; but that is part of Christianity -- something has to die. Ah, but when it dies then it has to be buried. What does that mean? Well, again it means we have to accept the fact that that thing that dies within us is to be allowed to lie dead. That is part of the gospel too. We must not try to revive it again. If that thing is the selfish self, the hunger for self-expression and self-fulfillment, of being glorified, of being the center of attention, then we have to agree to let it die. That is the point. We must not try to keep snatching it back in some subtle way and bring it back to life again. We must bury it.

But that is not easy to do, is it? We like to assert ourselves. We like to feel in charge and in control of everything in our life. We are uneasy to let somebody else make decisions for us, or run our affairs, and we keep trying to bring it back. But part of the gospel is we are to bury that which is dead. This is what Paul means when he says, "put off the old man which was crucified," {cf, Col 3:9, Rom 6:6}. Put it away and let it go and do not try to hang onto it and cling to our self-prerogatives, because (and the third element is), if we do, it leads on inevitably to a surprising recovery. Suddenly we discover that, in the humiliation and the hurt of death, something has happened. A resurrection occurs and the tragedy turns into a triumph. What we thought to be an end becomes a new beginning, and with it comes peace, love and joy. We discover there was meaning and purpose in our being put through that painful experience, whatever it was, that brought us to death. Now that is the gospel too. Paul says the whole reason for it is that we might come into newness of life and again and again experience this remarkable truth in our daily life.

Now he adds a condition here; we do not want to miss it. Notice how he puts it, "if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain." I do not want to dwell long on this, but I want to point out that it is possible to believe in vain. Your faith in Christ can be of such a superficial nature that you accept all the words of the gospel as a kind of an insurance policy against going to hell but you do not let it change anything in you. That is what Paul calls "believing in vain." And it happens all around us.

Just this week I heard of a very prominent leader of a church, an elder, a respected man who has been a faithful Christian for a long time, slipped away from what he had held his faith to be, and fell into moral evil in his life. This has raised the question of whether he has believed in vain or not. There can be a mechanical conformity to Christianity that never sees any need for discipline, for Bible study, for prayer or for fellowship. It merely goes for what it can get out of it. That is believing in vain.

Jesus said that will not hold up in the tests of life. When the crisis comes it collapses and fails. He said of certain ones like that, "Many will say to me 'did we not do many mighty works in your name?'" But he will say, "I never knew you; depart from me," {cf, Matt 7:22-23}.

The test of true faith, of course, is that it cannot quit. It can fail at times, temporarily, but it really cannot quit.

Some years ago a young man called me up and said, "I'm tired of being a Christian. I'm fed up with it. I've tried my best and nothing seems to work so I'm going to quit. I just wanted to let you know." I said, "I think it's a good idea. Why don't you do that? Why don't you give it up?" He said, "What do you mean?" "Well," I replied, "you said it. You said you were going to quit, and I think it's a good idea. Why don't you stop trying to be a Christian and go ahead and live the way you like? Pay no attention to the Bible, or the church, or the Word of God, or anything, and just enjoy yourself. Why don't you?" He said "You know I can't do that." I said, "Yes, I do, and I think it is about time you knew it too!" No, the test of true faith is that you cannot quit.

There are two things, then, the gospel does for you, Paul says, two simple divisions:

First, it makes you stand. Notice he says, "the gospel, which you received, by which you stand." That means you have a foundation; you have a place to handle life; you have a security to which you can resort at any time of pressure and problem and you can stand steady, no matter what kind of force comes against you. When you believe that God has forgiven your sins for Christ's sake, when you believe that God loves you and has

accepted you as his child, when you believe that he is working in you by the power of his resurrected life to enable you to love and to live as you ought and to give you power to say "No" when you need to say "No," you have a place to stand that can handle anything that comes. That is what Paul said these Corinthians had. They were loved by God, therefore they had a place of emotional security. That is the first thing the gospel does.

In a dangerous and slippery world like this, it is a tremendous thing to have a place where you can find love and acceptance and understanding and support in all the pressures. Well, that is what the gospel does. When things are frightening and foreboding all around, the gospel gives you a place of reassurance. I do not know how you feel when you pick up the newspaper and read that China has now invaded Vietnam, that Russia is standing by, ready to retaliate. These two great powers are about to leap at one another's throats. The Middle East is all aflame and in turmoil; wars are breaking out in the African states; the South American countries are restless and filled with violence and the threat of revolution. What does it do to you, living in a world like that? Who knows, warfare may break out very shortly and nuclear bombs will scream across our country? Well, in the face of an uncertain future the gospel gives us a sense of certainty. It reminds us, as we read in those wonderful words from Colossians, that there is One who is above all principalities and rulers and authorities and powers; he is in charge of all human events. When you fail and slide away and slip, the gospel is the place where you find recovery and an ability to come back again, sick of soul and hungry of heart, and find relief and forgiveness and healing for your hurting heart. That is the gospel -- the fact that God loves you despite all your failure and all your weakness. He is always ready to pick you up again and wash the hurt away, to start you out anew and teach you to walk in his strength and by his grace. That is a place to stand.

Paul goes on to say that the gospel is doing a second thing -- "by which you are being saved." Now he puts it in the present tense; that is why I translated it that way. It is not by which you "were" saved. That is past tense; or by which you "will be" saved, that is future. It is by which you are now "being" saved. The present tense indicates that he is thinking here about our present, earthly experience of life.

There are three tenses of salvation simply because there are three parts of our human being, our human nature. There is the spirit, which is the essential "you." That is who we really are. We are all spirits here. We are living in these various, multi-colored, multi-shaped bodies. Some are nice looking, some are a little bit loose and flabby, but we live in these bodies. Who we are is the spirit, but we cannot see that. You have never seen me; I have never seen you. We are spirits. Now, when you came to Christ that spirit was regenerated; it was made alive; it was indwelt by the Holy Spirit; it was linked to Jesus himself so that you and he are one Spirit. That is salvation past; that is the past tense, by which you "were" saved, as certain texts say.

Then there is the one in the future: you will be saved. Paul will be talking about these bodies; this is the theme of this great resurrection chapter. This body too has a part in God's plan. God is not going to throw it away. I do not care if you grind it up and burn it up and scatter it to the winds, God can gather it together. We are going to see how, and why, he does it in this very chapter. God has a purpose for your body. He is going to redeem it, and restore it, and it will be useful to you all throughout eternity. That is salvation to come.

But now Paul is talking about the soul, about your life, about how you are living from day to day. He says that is "being" saved according to how much you are resting on God at work in you, and allowing yourself to be the instrument of his grace. In these terms, what he is talking about is buying you back from wasting your life. In these terms, he is telling us that as we walk with him what we do becomes eternally profitable, not only profitable for this present time, but eternally so, so that you can use your money for eternal profit, you can use your time for eternal profit, you can lay up treasures in heaven and not upon earth. By the way you use your moments and your days, whether you employ them in the strength of God or from the energy of the flesh, you can determine what is going to be good and bad at the judgment seat of Christ, when "every one may receive the things done in his body, whether it be good or bad," {cf, 2 Cor 5:10}.

Now that is what the gospel is for.

The gospel is to give us stability, to give us steadiness, to give us an immovable foundation, to give us a place of recovery, to give us a place of healing and of wholeness, and finally to redeem our present existence so that it has eternal meaning as we live day by day.

What a tremendous theme that is!

What a marvelous thing that God has prepared for us, in this solid place to stand!

Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture. He was buried. He rose again from the dead according to the Scripture, that we too might learn to die to our sins, to bury them, and to rise again to the freshness and newness of life that we experience right now by faith in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the marvel, the wonder of the gospel. Help us to understand that this is to be the center of our life, the most basic thing about us is our faith in this good news. Nothing can be more foundational than that. Grant to us Lord, to take it seriously, to know that this is the beginning of a new life as we stand again and again at the place where the gospel brings us. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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