

All of us love stories of buried treasure. For example, there's the story of Howard Carter, a British archeologist who dug for six seasons in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. He was trying to find one untouched tomb of an ancient Pharaoh and his treasures. He was sponsored by a wealthy lord named Carnarvon. After six years, Carnarvon was getting impatient and was about to pull the plug on the whole project, when he received a telegram from Carter. Carter had been digging beneath the tomb of a well-known Pharaoh when he found a doorway to the tomb of a little-known Pharaoh named Tutankhamen. He found the unbroken seals to his tomb and called for Carnarvon to come before opening them. When he arrived, they broke the seals and in one of the most exciting moments in archeological history they pulled back the massive stone doors. As Carter stuck his head in with a candle, Carnarvon kept pulling at his coat saying, "What do you see?" All Carter said was, "I see wonderful things! I see wonderful things!"

It was in the same spirit Jesus told a similar story, although in this story the man who found buried treasure wasn't even looking for it. It was about a hired plowman working a field. The sun is beating down on him. He's just trying to finish a day's work and go home. But all of a sudden his plow strikes something beneath the surface of the soil. His animal is startled. He falls on his knees and begins to claw through the dirt. He finds a ceramic jar, rips off the top, and is overwhelmed by the gleam of gold. He can't believe his eyes! He puts the lid back on, makes sure no one has seen him, and buries the jar again. He's so excited about what he found he goes home and sells everything he has to buy the field where the treasure lay buried.

The story naturally begs the question, What's this treasure Jesus was talking about? What's so valuable a person would gladly sell everything he has to possess it? If you read the NT the answer is crystal clear: It's the gospel. In Matthew 4:23 we're told Jesus came "*preaching the gospel of the Kingdom.*" It's the same message his followers preached in the book of Acts (8:12). Today, as we continue in our Basecamp series, I want to answer the question, *What is this gospel?* The word gospel simply means "good news." What is this good news? Why is it so valuable you'd be a fool to hold on to what you have and forfeit the chance to possess it?

To answer this question I want us to look at 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. In this letter Paul has addressed a variety of problems in the

church at Corinth, and here he's addressing a misconception they had about the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of those who follow him.

The Centrality of the Gospel

He starts with these words.

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. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

Notice the word "gospel" is used twice here. Paul had already preached the gospel in Corinth. Paul didn't make up or invent the gospel; he received it. Down in verse 3 he says, "*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance.*" If you read the book of Acts and look at Paul's story you'll see he received it from Jesus himself. His ministry was one of simply passing that same message on to others. Whatever the gospel is, it's not like a box of Legos we use to construct something of our own making. It's more like an heirloom we try to protect and retain and pass on. Paul says this preaching of the gospel and passing it on is of first importance. We like to say, "Let the main thing be the plain thing, and the plain thing be the main thing." Well, the gospel is the main thing. It's the foundation for everything else.

Paul says the Corinthians had received this gospel; they'd believed it. Whatever the gospel is, it's something which calls for a response from us. We must receive it; we must believe it; we must as he says "take our stand" on it. This is what the Bible calls faith. Faith isn't just mentally agreeing to something; it's taking your stand on it. This is what the gospel calls for in terms of response.

And the result of this faith-response to the gospel is salvation. He says, "By this gospel you are saved..." Of course, this implies without the gospel we're unsaved. Saved from what? From sin and death. We're in major trouble apart from the gospel! We're still in our sins. What does that look like?

Well, first, it looks like slavery. We think we're free but we live for money, career, fame, romance, sex, comfort, and even social or political causes. We think we're in control of our lives, but we're slaves. We all have to live for something, and if we don't live for God, then we're driven by something else—by overwork

to achieve it, by fear if it's threatened, by anger if it's blocked, and despair if it's lost.

The Bible also says sin separates us from God; it brings us under his condemnation. A righteous God can't just look at our sin and say, "No big deal." It is a big deal. It separates us from a holy God. That's true even if we try really hard to live a good life. Look at it this way: Imagine a single mom with one son. She teaches him how to live—to be honest, to work hard, to help the needy. She loves her son and sacrifices to put him through college. Imagine when he graduates, he sees her less and less. Eventually, he hardly speaks to her at all, just sending her a card at Christmas. He never visits her or even answers her phone calls. But he does try to live just like she taught him—he works hard, tells the truth and gives money to charity. Would we say that's okay? Would we say that by living a "good life" but neglecting a relationship with the one to whom he owed everything he was okay? No way! It's no different with God. He created us; he sent his Son for us. Living a "good life" isn't enough; he wants to have a relationship with us.

One more consequence: our sin had a huge impact on the world around us. Creation itself was subject to futility and decay as a result of sin. Sin impacts us not just individually, but collectively. The physical world, as well as our social and political structures are all ruptured. Just this week we saw the shootings of congressmen in Virginia and UPS drivers in San Francisco. Every day we hear of how broken our world is.

With all that in mind, Paul says, "By this gospel you are saved." We're no longer slaves to our idols. Our relationship with God has been put back together. All that's gone wrong with the world will be restored. It's important to see Paul uses the present tense. Literally, he says, "By this gospel you are being saved." That implies something ongoing in our lives. Notice he says this salvation process takes place, "if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you believed in vain." Salvation is ongoing as we continue to hold firmly to the gospel. As we grow as believers, God doesn't move us **beyond** the gospel; he moves us more deeply **into** the gospel, because the power we need to change and mature comes **through** the gospel. The gospel doesn't just start the Christian life; it's the fuel that keeps us growing in this salvation process every day as we hold firmly to it. Real change can't come apart from the gospel.

That's what the gospel does, it saves us, but we still haven't explained how this happens. You'd think we'd all want to know how something as wonderful as this actually takes place.

The Content of the Gospel

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the

Twelve. 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. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (verses 3-8).

Notice the gospel is about a person. In order to save us, God didn't just give us information; he gave us a person. Paul calls him "Christ." That means the Anointed One; the Messiah. In other places he's called God's only Son. It's like God saw the predicament humanity was in—our slavery, our separation—and he decided to write himself into the story as Savior, sending his Son. Without Jesus there's no gospel. That's because of what he did; what he accomplished in real time history. Two things:

First, Christ died for our sins. At the heart of the gospel is the idea of substitution. A righteous and just God can't shrug off our sins. Our feeling guilty or being sorry or trying harder isn't enough. Someone has to pay. The Bay Area was outraged when a local judge gave a very light sentence to a Stanford student-athlete who raped a fellow student. He did that in part because the student said he was sorry. We have this sense that's not right. Someone must pay. Why, then, would we want a holy and righteous God to let wrongdoers off just because they're sorry? Again, someone has to pay.

Enter Jesus. He was the only human being who ever lived a sinless life. At the end of his life he deserved acceptance and blessing. But on the cross he took our place and paid our debt. He endured the rejection and condemnation we deserved so we might receive the acceptance and blessing he deserved. It's like that judge stepped down from his high bench and offered to serve the life sentence that guilty Stanford student deserved. That's what the Bible means when it says, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21). That's quite a trade, isn't it? He gets our sin, and we get his righteousness.

Notice Paul also mentions the fact he was buried. That's important because it demonstrates the undeniable reality of his death. There were people back then who believed a pure and holy God could never take on a flesh and blood body. That would defile God. And with that they claimed Christ just appeared to be a man of flesh and blood. He was really a being of pure spirit and his flesh and blood were just an illusion. Paul says "No!" Christ was buried to remind us Jesus died a real death.

The second fact of the gospel is Christ was raised on the third day. Why is the resurrection crucial to our salvation? For a couple of reasons. It's important because it means God the Father was saying, "Yes and Amen" to his Son's sacrifice. It's confirmation God accepted his sacrifice as payment in full for our debt of sin. That's what Paul means when he says later, "*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins*" (v.

17). And the fact Christ appeared to so many people reminds us again it wasn't just some sort of spiritual resurrection; it was a real resurrection of flesh and blood that took place in real time on the third day. In fact, many of the people he appeared to were still alive when Paul wrote this. It's like he's saying, "If you don't believe me, go talk to them!"

The resurrection is also central to the gospel because it reminds us we have hope beyond the grave. Death isn't the last word in our lives. Christ was raised, so we'll be raised. This is what Paul means when he says later in verse 20, *"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."* For the Christian, death is merely falling asleep because just as Jesus was raised, so we'll be raised to new life. So death has lost its sting for us on a personal level. And this hope extends to all creation. When Jesus comes again not only will he raise us up but he'll bring a whole new creation. Jesus came the first time to save us from the penalty of sin, but he'll come again to save us from the presence of sin and evil, bringing a new heaven and a new earth, cleansed from brokenness, corruption and injustice.

And both of these things—his death for our sins and his resurrection—took place "according to the scriptures." He's pointing back to the OT Scripture because the NT wasn't written yet. He's saying none of this is new; it's all foretold in the OT. Isaiah wrote about One who *"was pierced for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"* (Is. 53:5). The psalmist could write, *"you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay"* (Ps. 16:10). Both his death and resurrection were the fulfillment of Scripture.

So based on all of this let me give you a concise definition of the gospel: Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin and reconciling us with himself, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever.

All Howard Carter could say was, "I see wonderful things." Well, I see wonderful things here as well, don't you? And the most wonderful thing is how this plays out in the story of our lives.

The Power of the Gospel

That's what Paul focuses on in verses 9-11. At the end of verse 8 he says Christ appeared to him "as one abnormally born." I'm sorry to be graphic, but he uses a metaphor here of a child who is aborted before birth. Paul goes and explains why he sees himself in that way.

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. 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. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed (verses 9-11).

It's only by the grace of God an aborted child could live. Paul is "Exhibit A" of that grace. He'd been a zealous Pharisee who persecuted the church of God, even presiding over the stoning of Stephen. That's why he says he's the least of the apostles, not even deserving to be called an apostle. But then he gets to the heart of the gospel when he says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am." It was by God's grace Paul became a follower of Jesus, and it was that grace which continued to work in his life.

You see, the gospel is life-changing. It has power to revolutionize our lives. It's not just about the grace of forgiveness; it's about the grace of life-change. Two weeks ago we celebrated the 25th anniversary of our Higher Power ministry, and the stories of life-change were amazing. He changed the lives of addicts like Steve Aurell and Vicente Quintana, but he also changed the lives of religious Pharisees like Paul. And it's all grace. The Christian life starts by grace and it grows by grace.

What are some of the ways the gospel of the grace of God changes us? Think for a moment about a few of our basic psychological needs:

One of our needs is for security. Security means we're not controlled by fear and anxiety. In our fallen condition, we seek for security through things like money, relationships, career or even religion. Whatever we look to for security becomes a god. We center our entire life around growing and protecting our retirement account, or maintaining that one relationship, or planning the next career move, or keeping all the rules. If one of those things is threatened, our life is turned upside-down. But in the gospel, our security is in an unchanging God and his promises. One of the things he promises is to finish the work he began in us. Even when we fail, we can come before the throne of grace and receive mercy. He's said he'll never leave us nor forsake us and nothing can ever separate us from his love. That's true security and it's only found in the gospel.

Another basic need is for significance. We all need to feel like we matter; that we're special in some way. Why does a child who just learned to dive into a swimming pool say over and over again to her dad, "Daddy, watch me! Watch me!?" But the problem is, being significant can become an obsession. We'll do anything to find significance. Generally, most of us find something we're good at and build our lives around that. For me growing up it was sports. I was driven to extreme commitment to sports as a kid, not just because I loved sports but because it brought me significance. If I hadn't found Christ before college, my life would have been shattered because my college athletic career eventually fizzled. Though that was hard, it didn't destroy me because I was learning to build my sense of significance on the fact I was

loved by God and he created me for a purpose. The gospel roots our significance in God. People today get their significance from the kind of car they drive, or the house they live in, or the salary they earn, or the kind of children they raise. But cars break down, houses age, salaries are never enough and children don't always turn out as we wish. Placing our sense of significance in anyone other than Jesus is risky business.

Finally, a third basic need is for purpose. You can't live without a "Why?" What's your "Why?" What's your purpose? In a national survey taken last year, 18- to 24-year-olds report that having a clear purpose in life is a big part of being a "real" adult. But only 43% say they have a clear picture of what they want in life, 36% say their career path aligns with their life purpose, and only 30% know why they're here. Christine Whelan, a professor at U. of Wisconsin says, "This [study] isn't good news: Coasting is existing, not thriving. The majority of young adults who say they don't have a clear picture of what they want in life also say they're existing but not thriving, while those with purpose more often say they're thriving."

But it's not just young adults. Before he died, Charles Colson told about his hometown of Naples, Florida, a beautiful retirement community. He said, "It's an absolute nirvana for all golfers, and they all come there. They're all CEOs of major corporations, and they retire to Naples, and this is 'it'—27 golf courses and miles of sparkling beach and the best country clubs. I watch these guys; they're powerful people. They have this New York look on their face; they're determined. But now, all of a sudden, they start measuring their lives by how many golf games they can get in. I often say to them, 'Do you really want to live your life counting up the number of times you chase that little white ball around those greens?' And they kind of chuckle, but it's a nervous chuckle, because in six months they've realized how banal their lives are, and they've got beautiful homes—castles—and when they get bored with that, they build a bigger castle, and they're miserable."

Why? Because they have no purpose beyond themselves. What's your purpose? The Gospel gives purpose. The Westminster

Confession of Faith said the chief purpose of man is to enjoy God and glorify him forever. Jesus said his purpose was "to do the will of him who sent me" which meant "to seek and to save the lost." A few years ago I put together a purpose statement for however many years the Lord gives me. It's based on Psalm 71:18, "**To declare his power to the next generation, his might to all who are to come.**" That's my "Why?"

I want to finish today by challenging you to be a gospel-centered person. For some that will mean you embrace the gospel for the first time; that you receive it as good news for you; that you take your stand on Jesus as the One who died for your sins and was raised up on the third day to give you hope beyond the grave. For others who've already embraced the gospel it means to re-commit yourself to being a gospel-centered person; to find your security, your significance and your purpose in the gospel.

A couple of weeks ago I was standing in the lobby after one of our services and two couples walked up to me. One of the couples introduced themselves and then introduced their two friends. They said, "Our friends have been coming to church with us and they want to become Christians." Honestly, I was a little taken back, but then I realized that's why we're here! So I briefly made sure they understood the gospel and led them in a prayer to receive Christ. When I looked up the tears were flowing and I could tell the Holy Spirit was all over this. It's almost as if they found buried treasure. It's like they were saying, "I see wonderful things! I see wonderful things!" And it struck me—that's the power of the gospel. That's gospel-centered people making other gospel-centered people. And that's a huge part of why we exist as a church. Our mission is to make and mature more followers of Christ. That only happens through the gospel.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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