

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

1 COR. 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;

2 By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part re-

main unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet 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 which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

11 Therefore whether *it were* I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed.

NOTES

Witnesses to Christ's Resurrection

(Easter)

Lesson Text: I Corinthians 15:1-11

Related Scriptures: Matthew 28:1-9; Mark 16:1-13; Luke 24:1-49;
John 20:1-18; Acts 1:3-4; I Corinthians 15:12-28

TIME: A.D. 55

PLACE: from Ephesus

GOLDEN TEXT—"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:3-4).

Lesson Exposition

TESTIMONY OF THE GOSPEL— I Cor. 15:1-2

To precede his defense of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul first reminds the Corinthians of the power of the gospel that he had preached to them and that they had received. We all need to be reminded of the basics of the gospel from time to time because, as Paul stated elsewhere, "it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). We are saved by God, not ourselves.

Paul's entire preaching ministry, as well as the proclamation of the other apostles, centered around the focal point of the gospel—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the single most important aspect of Christianity. In fact, Paul states that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we are still in our sins and our faith is futile (I Cor. 15:14, 17).

TESTIMONY OF EYEWITNESSES— I Cor. 15:3-7

The gospel news (I Cor. 15:3a). As already stated, the most important thing to Paul was preaching the resurrection of Jesus. We cannot keep this information to ourselves. We are not saved by leading better lives, by becoming better neighbors, or by any type of moral improvement. These things are not bad, nor should they be discouraged, but none of these things can make us holy enough for God to save us.

The gospel creed (I Cor. 15:3b-4). The news of Jesus' resurrection was so important to the early church that they quickly formulated a creed that was easy to memorize and recite. This was essential because many people in the first century were illiterate and needed something they could easily learn and remember. Paul's recording of this creed in I Corinthians dates to around A.D. 55, only twenty-five years

after the events themselves.

The creed that was taught by the church very succinctly yet truthfully defines the gospel in three statements: Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (Isa. 53:4-8); He was buried (53:9); and He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (Ps. 16:10; cf. Acts 13:32-37). The resurrection was the culmination of God's plan of redemption.

Resurrection appearance to Peter (I Cor. 15:5). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not something mystical or imagined. It was not conjured up by Jesus' followers. In fact, the disciples were skeptical of it and doubted the first claims that Jesus had been seen alive (cf. Mark 16:9-11; Luke 24:10-11). Some even doubted when they saw Him themselves (Matt. 28:17).

Eyewitness testimony is a powerful line of evidence in any case, and Paul lines up witnesses in this passage. He begins with Peter, to whom Jesus made a special appearance (Luke 24:34; cf. Mark 16:7).

Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times, something detailed in all four Gospels (Matt. 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). But Jesus showed that He had not given up on Peter by appearing to him personally after He had been raised from the dead. Peter was forgiven and restored by the risen Jesus (John 21:15-19).

Resurrection appearance to five hundred (I Cor. 15:6). In addition to Peter and the rest of the Twelve, Jesus also appeared to over five hundred men at the same time. None of their names are given, but this detail prevents the assertion that the resurrection was made up by the disciples of Jesus. The Twelve were not the only ones to see Jesus alive after He had been declared dead and was buried.

Paul states that most of these five

hundred men were still alive at the time he penned I Corinthians, which means that Paul's story could be corroborated by witnesses.

Resurrection appearance to James (I Cor. 15:7). The people Paul mentioned up to this point were believers in Jesus before His death and resurrection. He now brings up a man who was not a believer during the life of Jesus and certainly not a follower of Christ. This man is James, the brother of Jesus. During the Lord's ministry on earth, James expressed embarrassment and even anger that Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God (cf. John 7:1-5; Luke 8:19-21).

What changed James's mind? Jesus appeared to him after He had been raised from the dead. The resurrection convinced James that Jesus was the Son of God. It changed him from an unbeliever to a believer.

Jesus also appeared to the rest of the apostles. Though we typically reserve the word "apostle" for one of the Twelve, in this instance it refers to a group that was larger than the Twelve. Their names are not mentioned, but they would have been well known in the early church. This larger group would have included Matthias, who was named as the replacement for Judas Iscariot (cf. Acts 1:21-26).

Any of these sources could have refuted Paul's story, but they did not. The fact of the resurrection still stands today. The claims Paul is making in this passage did not originate with him, however. They were already the established teaching of the church.

TESTIMONY OF PAUL— I Cor. 15:8-11

Grace fosters humility (I Cor. 15:8-9). The last eyewitness Paul calls forward is himself. As "one born out of due time," that is, as one who did not have three years of training

as the Twelve did, Paul experienced his sighting of Jesus after He had ascended to heaven (Acts 9:3-6). While the twelve disciples were studying at the feet of Jesus, Paul was studying under the Jewish rabbi Gamaliel (cf. Acts 22:3). Jesus appeared to Paul in bodily form, however, and commissioned him to preach the gospel.

Paul considered himself to be the least of the apostles. This was not false humility on his part. He listed himself last and considered himself the least because he had persecuted the church. He was qualified to be an apostle only because Jesus appeared to him and called him.

Grace fosters good works (I Cor. 15:10-11). After seeing Jesus in His resurrected glory, Paul went immediately from antagonist to apostle by the grace of God. God's grace did not lead Paul to laziness, however, but caused him to work harder than anyone else. He did not work *for* salvation, but *because* of salvation.

Paul is not boasting in what he was doing for Christ, but rather in what Christ had done in and for him. Grace was at work in his life, and that is what enabled him to preach the gospel the way he did. Paul was not out on a self-help mission but was empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what God had called him to do. Previously, he thought he was doing God's will by persecuting those who proclaimed the name of Jesus. He had considered Jesus a dead blasphemer who caused more trouble for Jews than anyone else. But when Jesus appeared to him, he learned that he himself was the one in the wrong.

Paul is not saying he worked harder than others in order to brag about himself. He is simply saying that the fire that was in him would not go out. Paul did not care about human recognition (cf. I Cor. 4:3). He rejoiced in the fact that the gospel was being preached

and that people believed.

The gospel proclamation revolved around the preaching of the resurrection. Paul was absolutely convinced that he had seen the risen Jesus, just as over five hundred other men had, including the apostles. The resurrection changed his life, just as it changes the lives of believers today.

Has the resurrection changed your life, or is it just something the pastor preaches about every Easter? Has it impacted you deeply? May the realization that Christ is alive help you resolve to trust Him completely.

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to be reminded of the basic elements of the gospel from time to time?
2. What is the focal point of the gospel?
3. Why did the early church formulate the truth of Jesus' resurrection into a creed?
4. According to Paul (I Cor. 15:3-4), what three statements summarize the gospel?
5. How did Jesus' disciples react when they first heard that He had been resurrected?
6. What was significant about Jesus' personal appearance to Peter?
7. What was significant about Jesus' appearance to over five hundred men at one time?
8. What was significant about Jesus' appearance to His brother James?
9. Why did Paul consider himself to be the least of the apostles?
10. What was the result of God's grace in Paul?

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The faith that saves is the same faith that enables believers to stand firm in their Christian walk (I Cor. 15:1-2).
2. Our witness for Christ must be anchored in the gospel (vss. 3-4).
3. Our faith in Christ has been confirmed by ample evidence, but many choose to doubt Him (vss. 5-8).
4. Rejoice that past sins do not disqualify believers from doing great works for Christ (vs. 9).
5. God's grace at work in us as believers transforms us beyond all human expectation (vs. 10).
6. Believers are saved by the power of the gospel—not by any human teacher (vs. 11).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Where in your community do people most need the gospel?
2. What does it mean to you that many at Corinth remained faithful to the gospel in spite of all the problems? Discuss.
3. What does it mean that Jesus died for our sins (cf. Isa. 53:3-6; John 3:16-18; I Cor. 1:23)?
4. What would it mean for our faith if Jesus had not risen from the dead?
5. What made Paul such a dynamic witness for the gospel (cf. I Cor. 15:10)? Discuss.

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

“For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (I Corinthians 15:3-4).

The gospel is centered on the atoning death of “Christ,” a Greek term corresponding to the Hebrew title “Messiah,” meaning “Anointed One.” In the Old Testament, kings, priests, and prophets were anointed with oil to signify that the Lord Himself had set them apart for a special function. Jesus was not just a teacher or good example to follow but “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Though the gospel's foundation is the sacrificial death of Christ, it would hardly be good news if His story ended at the tomb. Thanks be to God, it did not! Jesus also rose again!

“But now is Christ risen from the dead” (vs. 20). Paul backs up this astounding statement with eyewitness accounts. The resurrection of Jesus is not a myth, but a historical fact, witnessed by Peter, the Twelve, and over 500 believers at once. The risen Christ also appeared to Paul.

All of this occurred according to the Scriptures, which repeatedly foretold the death and resurrection of Messiah (cf. Ps. 16:10; 22:16-18; Isa. 52:13—53:12). Even the story of Jonah was revealed by Jesus to be a foreshadowing of His own burial: “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).

—Mark Winter.