



Reviewing the Basics

(4) “What is the Good News?”

1 Corinthians 15:1-5

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This is sermon #4 in our series called “Reviewing the Basics.” We’re dealing with the basics of the message of the Bible. For most of us this is a review although in the nature of the case it is more of a review for some than for others. But the reason for the series is that a review is good for all of us.

In the first sermon we looked at the mission that Jesus gave his disciples, and through them the whole church, to bring the message of repentance for the remission of sins to the whole world. What I particularly emphasized in that sermon is that this mission embodies Jesus’ claim to have the authority to tell every human being how to live their lives. The most basic of all the basics is the biblical claim that God as the creator has the authority over all that he has made, over every single human being in the world.

In the second sermon we sought to answer the question, “Why does God make such a big deal about sin?” In that sermon we looked at God’s command to Adam right at the beginning not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and we saw that by giving that command God was making the point that he created mankind to be obedient to his commands. We saw too that by breaking that command, Adam was rejecting God’s authority and claiming for himself the right to decide what was right and wrong which is a claim to godlike status. When we think of a created-being revolting against his creator and grasping for himself the status of a god, we get some sense of what is serious matter it is to sin against God. We see that death is the appropriate penalty for such cosmic treason.

Two weeks ago we looked at what it means that we are sinners. The focus in that sermon was not so much the evil of sin but the consequences of sin and the fact that as sinners we are inclined towards sin at the very core of our being. We saw that one of the things that it means to be a sinner is that we are guilty of breaking God's law and deserving of the eternal punishment of hell. We also saw that being a sinner means that we are dead in sin, which means that we are dead towards God or dead in trespasses and sins. The Bible describes what this means when it says in Genesis 6:5, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." We are guilty and we have sinful natures.

So two sermons about sin. Spending some time thinking about sin is necessary to understand the message of the Bible. The Bible has an awful lot to say about sin and that is because sin is the problem of all problems. There is no greater threat to human wellbeing than sin. There is no greater cause of human suffering than sin. Thankfully, however, the Bible does not end with the message of sin and the punishment of sin. If that were the case there would be no hope. We could only live with "a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" as the Bible describes the lot of some who have fallen away (Hebrews 10:26-27).

The Bible is a message of God's plan for the rescue of sinners from the predicament we have placed ourselves in by our sin. The message that Jesus told his disciples to preach to the whole world was a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There is a way to be forgiven. The message that God would have preached to the whole world is that he has provided a way to be rescued from sin and its consequences. One of the terms that the Bible uses to refer to that message is "gospel" which means good news. The message of the Bible contains bad news, but the bad news leads to the good news which is that God has provided a solution for sin and its consequences.

Now the verses that we read from 1 Corinthians 15 use the term "gospel" and give a short summary of the gospel. Paul introduces his summary in verses 1-2: "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the

gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved....” Notice here that I am following the example of Paul by reminding you of the gospel. The Corinthians had heard the gospel before. They had responded to it. But Paul knows that it will be beneficial for them to be reminded of it.

Paul uses the word, “saved,” to describe the effect of the gospel. He says to the Corinthians that they are being saved by the gospel. The gospel is the way of salvation. It assumes a danger that we need to be saved from. The gospel is about salvation from hell. It is about salvation from sin. It is about salvation from death. That is why it is good news.

Now this idea leaves many people unimpressed. They feel that they don’t need saving. They do not feel a need for what God is offering in the gospel. This is basically the case with everyone who is not a Christian. They don’t feel that they need to be saved. That is why the Biblical message begins with God and his claims and sin and its consequences. That is why we must hear about and talk about sin and the punishment of sin. In order for people to do what God tells them to do to be saved, they must be convinced of their need of salvation. The idea of salvation only is precious if we understand the danger we are in as unsaved sinners. The good news is that we can be saved from the danger we are in because we are sinners.

Well what is the message? Paul gives a summary in verses 3-4. In verse 3 he says, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” The good news has many aspects to it. A large part of the Bible is devoted to teaching us all the different facets of the good news. It is a big subject. Ultimately it covers the renewing of the whole creation. But here Paul singles out a few things of first importance. These are at the heart of the whole message. Everything else builds on the few things that Paul mentions in verses 3-4. And the first is this: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” The death of Christ is so important that earlier in this letter Paul had told the Corinthians, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The resurrection is also of fundamental

importance as we will see, but the death of Christ receives a massive emphasis in the biblical account of the good news.

We see that emphasis in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books are called gospels because they are accounts of the good news according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We have four accounts of the good news about Jesus in the four gospels. And each of those gospels ends with lengthy accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus. One New Testament scholar has described the four gospels as accounts of Jesus' death with long introductions. The death of Jesus on the cross receives massive emphasis in the New Testament. It is at the heart of the good news. And Paul summarizes that in our text by saying "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures."

"Christ died for our sins...." We can get a long way towards understanding these words just by thinking about them. Notice that the death is Christ's and the sins are ours. We know that the penalty for sin is death. And we know that we are sinners who deserve to die. But the death that is mentioned in this phrase is not ours, but Christ's. And the whole thing is good news. The good news is that Christ died instead of us. Christ died the death that we deserve to die. Christ died in our place. Christ received the punishment that we deserve in order that we do not have to receive that punishment.

The idea here is that of substitution. That is an important term for our understanding of the significance of the death of Christ. Christ died as our substitute. We deserve to die, but God was willing to accept the death of Christ as a substitute for our death. This is at the heart of the good news. This is a message of first importance.

That it is a message of first importance is reflected in the fact that it is mentioned so often in the New Testament. We have already seen that each of the four gospels devote significant space to the death of Christ. This massive emphasis continues in the rest of the New Testament.

Here are just a few examples. Galatians 1:3-4, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our

God and Father....” Romans 5:10 says that “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son....” 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 says, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.” These are just three of a large number of texts that could be mentioned to illustrate how central the death of Christ is to the message of the New Testament.

Now it is significant that Paul in our text says that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” When the word “Scriptures” is used in the New Testament, it is usually referring to the Old Testament Scriptures. So Paul is saying here that the death of Christ was “in accordance with the [Old Testament] Scriptures.” This means a lot of different things. It means that the Old Testament predicted the death of Christ, but it also means that the Old Testament Scriptures provide the conceptual background for interpreting the death of Christ. The key here is the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, God instructed his people to offer sacrifices to him for various purposes. Sometimes, for instance, the sacrifices were thank-offerings. But often they were sin offerings. For the sin offerings, the animal sacrifice was offered in the place of the people as a payment for sin. Leviticus 1 gives directions for what were called, burnt offerings. A burnt offering was an offering for sin. Leviticus 1:4 says, “He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” The word “atonement” refers to “a process of bringing those who are estranged into a unity,” according to the *New Bible Dictionary*.

The point is that the sacrifice of an animal was accepted by God in the place of the sinner so that the relationship between God and the sinner could be restored. The sacrifice makes atonement for the sins of the sinner. Now the New Testament makes it clear that these sacrifices were accepted in anticipation of the sacrifice of Christ. If the sacrifices actually took away sin, the death of Christ would not have been necessary. But what the Old Testament sacrifices did was prepare for the death of Christ. And one of the ways that they did that was to provide the framework for understanding the meaning of the death of

Christ. We see this connection in John 1:29 where John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Lambs were often used as sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament period and here John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God. The whole idea of a sacrifice for sin is rooted in the Old Testament sacrificial system. And that is part of what Paul means when he says that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”

Another way in which the death of Christ was “according to the Scriptures” is that it fulfilled Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is tremendously important for providing the background for understanding the significance of the death of Christ. It is one of the passages in Isaiah that refers to the servant of the Lord. The servant of the Lord was one of the ways that Isaiah referred to the one whom God was going to send to bring salvation to Israel. This is some of what we read in Isaiah 53 concerning the servant of the Lord. Verses 5-6, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

The idea of substitution is very clear in these verses. And indeed, these verses are part of the reason that Paul in our text says that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” And this is at the heart of the good news. Christ died for our sins.

Now it is important to acknowledge that this is a very strange message in our day and age. In the days of the ancient religions with their animal and sometimes even human sacrifices, it was not quite as strange, but today in our secular world the idea of a human being dying for the sins of others is very strange and even bizarre. Although it was strange enough in the world of the New Testament because Paul acknowledges that in 1 Corinthians 1:18 where he says that “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.” We need to understand that God often does things that are very strange to unbelievers and even for believers. In Galatians 5:11 Paul uses the phrase, “the offense of the cross.” The message of the cross is offensive to unbelievers. It is even disgusting. And yet it is front and center in the good news that the Bible

teaches. In our text Paul writes of this as something of first importance. It is at the heart of the good news.

Now Paul says of the Corinthians that this good news was something that they had received and by which they were being saved. The message of the salvation through the death of Christ is something that must be received if we would participate in it. It can be received. But it can also be rejected. And if it is rejected, there is no good news. John 3:18 says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

To those who receive God's offer of forgiveness on the basis of the death of Christ, this is the best possible news. It is being saved. It means that our sins are forgiven and that we are right with God. The Bible describes the blessings of salvation through the death of Christ in a number of different ways. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Just before he went to the cross, Jesus said to his disciples in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." The world is full of people who have no peace. The world is full of people who are burdened with guilt. The good news is a message of peace through faith in the one who died for our sins. In Romans 5:1 Paul wrote, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." In Romans 8:1 he says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Peter, in 1 Peter 1:8 writes, "Though you do not see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."

There are many more reasons that the gospel is good news. But these that I have mentioned are very precious. Rest for our souls. Peace with God. No condemnation. Inexpressible joy. Nothing else in all the world is worth more than these things. And the wonderful thing about the rest and peace and joy that is available to believers through the gospel is that they rest on the deepest and most fundamental wellbeing that is possible. People who are not believers sometimes experience something of rest, and peace and joy, but when they experience these

things they are ignorant of the fact that they are in fact under the wrath of God and heading for hell. The only way that unbelievers can have peace and rest and joy is if they are ignorant of the truth about their situation or if they suppress the truth about their situation. The rest, peace and joy that Christians experience is rooted in the true nature of things. It is based on reality not illusion. It really and truly is well with their souls. And the foundation for it all is the death of Christ for our sins.

Now Paul also mentions the burial of Christ as one of the things of first importance. I will not say anything about the specifically because it is very closely related to Jesus' death. And so the last thing that Paul mentions in this summary of the gospel is the resurrection of Jesus. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received ... that he [Jesus] was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." The resurrection of Jesus is also at the core of the good news. Indeed as Paul goes on to say, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead there would be no good news. Verse 17, "And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." The implication of this is that Jesus was raised from the dead because God accepted the payment that he made for the sins of his people. If death is the penalty for sin and if that penalty has been paid, justice requires life – a resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the result of him having paid the death penalty for sin. Once the penalty is paid, the sinner goes free. Jesus was a sinner in the sense that our sins were laid on him. Once he paid the penalty for sin, he had defeated death and up from the grave he arose.

And he shares that life with his people. Verse 22, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." We saw last time from Ephesians 2 that believers are made alive together with Christ. That means life in all its fullness. It means spiritual life right now. But spiritual life is also eternal life. Once we receive the resurrection life of Jesus, we are alive forever. We have eternal life. This does not mean that we will not die physically, but it means that when we die physically we continue living spiritually in the presence of God. And it also means the resurrection of our bodies on the day when Christ returns. In verses 20-23 of this chapter Paul refers to Jesus' resurrection as the firstfruits.

Verse 23 says, “But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.” The firstfruits are the first part of the harvest. This imagery teaches us that all of God’s people will experience the resurrection of their bodies just as Christ was raised from the dead. First Christ. Then all of his people.

This also belongs to the good news. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, death has been a reality in this world. Death poisons everything. Death in the sense of spiritual death – being dead in trespasses and sins – is the cause of incalculable misery in our lives and in the world. Sin is so destructive, and we sin because we are dead in sins and trespasses. When we receive the life of Christ we begin to change as we gradually are transformed by the word and Spirit of Christ. We experience many blessings in the here and now already as a result of the obedience that we begin to perform because of the resurrection life of Christ in us.

But then there is the future resurrection. Physical death is not the end. We have hope in the face of death. What a blessing that is! The fact that we must die physically is an awful thing. It is so sad that this life is so short and that it comes to an end. The reality of death casts a shadow over the whole of our lives. The fact that we must die haunts us.

But the good news is that because of Christ’s death and resurrection, death is not the end. We survive death in our spirits and one day we will be raised from the dead just as Christ was raised from the dead. And so we have hope in the face of the greatest enemy. Verses 25-26 say, “For he [Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Because of the resurrection of Christ we know that death is not the final word. And so we have hope in the face of death.

Paul sings of that hope at the end of this chapter. 1 Corinthians 15:51–57, ⁵¹Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is

swallowed up in victory.”⁵⁵“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That is the gospel. That is good news. Because of what Christ has done believers can have rest for their souls. Peace with God and in their hearts. Inexpressible joy. And hope in the face of death. We do not always experience the fullness of these things in this life because of our remaining sin and the weakness of our faith, but if we are believers we know something of these things, and we can know more through spiritual growth through the means of grace.

The message of the Bible is good news – the best possible news. The cause of all misery and suffering namely sin, has been defeated by the death and resurrection of Christ and the blessings of salvation are promised to all who receive the good news through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.