

1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Habakkuk 1:1-2:5
Habakkuk 3

“The Gospel of the Resurrection”

September 14, 2014

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus opened an Easter sermon –
a sermon on the resurrection of Christ –
by appealing to the prophet Habakkuk:

“I will stand upon my watch, says the venerable Habakkuk;
and I will take my post beside him today on the authority and observation
which was given me of the Spirit;
and I will look forth, and will observe what shall be said to me.

Well, I have taken my stand, and looked forth;

and behold a man riding on the clouds and he is very high,
and his countenance is as the countenance of Angel,
and his vesture as the brightness of piercing lightning;
and he lifts his hand toward the East, and cries with a loud voice.

His voice is like the voice of a trumpet;

and round about Him is as it were a multitude of the Heavenly Host;
and he says, Today is salvation come unto the world,
to that which is visible, and to that which is invisible.

Christ is risen from the dead, rise ye with Him.

Christ is returned again to Himself, return ye.

Christ is freed from the tomb, be ye freed from the bond of sin.

The gates of hell are opened, and death is destroyed,

and the old Adam is put aside, and the New is fulfilled;

if any man be in Christ he is a new creature (2 Cor 5:17); be ye renewed.

Thus he speaks; and the rest sing out,

as they did before when Christ was manifested to us by His birth on earth,
their glory to God in the highest, on earth, peace, goodwill among men.

And with them I also utter the same words among you.

And would that I might receive a voice that should rank with the Angel's,
and should sound through all the ends of the earth.”

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm>

Why does Gregory appeal to Habakkuk?

Habakkuk had brought two complaints to God.

First, the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth.

God answers by saying that he will bring judgment on Jerusalem.

Habakkuk then brings a second complaint – will God destroy and never redeem?

And God answers that “the righteous shall live by his faith.” (2:4)

When Paul says 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ died for our sins “in accordance with the Scriptures”
and that he was raised on the third day “in accordance with the Scriptures,”

Paul is not saying that Jesus fulfilled a particular prophecy here or there.

Paul is saying that the whole pattern and teaching of the OT is fulfilled in Jesus.

Gregory sees Habakkuk standing at his post,
waiting to see how God would answer the dilemma –
on the one hand, there is Israel's rebellion – which deserved judgment –
on the other hand, there is God's promise
to bring salvation to the nations through Israel.
How can God be just and the justifier of the ungodly?

Gregory understood that Habakkuk is looking for the resurrection of Jesus!
We sing about that in Habakkuk 3.

Sing Habakkuk 3
Read 1 Corinthians 14:36-15:11

Sometimes we can feel a lot like Habakkuk.
We have heard the report – we have heard the message of the mighty deeds of God.
But that seems so long ago – so far away.

Renew your work in our day!

It's all nice and good that Paul can appeal to the 500 who saw the risen Christ –
but they've all been dead for more than 1900 years now.

Jesus knew that we'd struggle with that.
That's why he said to Thomas,
“Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29)

But all of the scriptures testify that the Christ must suffer and die for our sins –
and be raised up from the dead – so that the forgiveness of sins
might be proclaimed in all the earth.

If Christ is not raised from the dead bodily – then we are not saved.

Why does Paul end with the resurrection?
If you think back to the beginning of 1 Corinthians,
Paul had highlighted the *cross* of Christ – “we preach Christ and him crucified.”

The center of Paul's gospel is the saving efficacy of the cross of Christ –
and God's vindication of Christ in the resurrection.

And it's not just Paul!
Whenever *any* of the apostles talk about *what matters* –
you will *always* find the cross and the resurrection/glorification of Christ.

The suffering and glory of Jesus – the cross and resurrection of Christ – this is the gospel!

Over the next couple weeks, Paul will work out the implications of Jesus' resurrection for us.
But today we are just called to *remember the gospel!*

There is a certain simplicity here –
and a certain beauty in the way that Paul says it.

1. Remember the Gospel (v1-2)

Now I would remind you, brothers,^[a] of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Paul reminds us of the gospel.

Anthony Thiselton points out that the word Paul uses here is not the word
“to remind” – but to call to your attention.

The implication here is that Paul is rebuking the Corinthians.

In other words, all the problems in Corinth are rooted in this one.

If you forget the gospel,
if the gospel leaks out of your mind –
so that you don't really know the gospel anymore –
then everything will fall apart.

In Deuteronomy, Moses had warned against *forgetting* the mighty deeds of God.

If you forget the LORD your God,
that is the equivalent of idolatry.

Here in 1 Corinthians, Paul suggests that the root of all the problems in Corinth
is that they have forgotten the gospel.

Obviously, ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’ is not just a matter of the intellect.
It's about worship.

And there are four things about the gospel that Paul wants to call back to our minds:

First, it is

a. The Gospel I Preached to You

The word “gospel” means “good news.”

This is the message – the good tidings – that Habakkuk was longing to hear!

And Paul says that the Corinthians shouldn't have forgotten this!

This is the foundation for everything else!

And second, it is

b. The Gospel Which You Received

The gospel starts as a message which is proclaimed –

a message that is preached.
Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
And by faith, you received the gospel –
you received the good news.

And so third, it is

c. The Gospel in Which You Stand

This is important.

Paul is saying that the Corinthians have taken their stand in the gospel.
It's true that they are forgetful and they are not acting like they believe the gospel.
But this is the gospel in which you stand.

And finally, it is

d. The Gospel by Which You Are Being Saved

The present passive is important –

it's not a past tense –
it's not the gospel by which you “were saved” –
it is the gospel by which you *are being saved*.

Scripture uses the language of salvation in three ways:

“I was saved” –
salvation as a past act – whereby Christ has delivered me from sin and death;
“I am being saved” –
salvation as a present reality –
“work out your salvation with fear and trembling,
for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do” (Phil 2:13)
“I will be saved” –
salvation as a future hope – that God will save me at the final day.

“I was saved...I am being saved...I will be saved” –

But Paul adds a caveat:

“if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain.”

If you forget the gospel –

if you let go of the word that Paul preached –
that is what it would mean to “believe in vain.”

Over the last several months, we've worked through a lot of hard issues:

Sex, marriage, and divorce.
Homosexuality, singleness, lawsuits, individual rights vs. the community.
Women in the church – spiritual gifts – authority and submission.

Paul now comes back to first principles.

In most of his epistles, he *starts* with who Christ is, and what Christ has done –
and *then* turns to practical matters.

He did *some of that* in Corinthians.

He has certainly continued to point to who Jesus is and what Jesus has done!

But rhetorically, Paul is doing something different in 1 Corinthians than he does elsewhere.

After working through all the practical stuff,

Paul wants to leave them with the gospel.

Because *this* is the thing that matters most!

2. “Of First Importance” (v3-7)

³ *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:*

Paul didn’t make this up.

Paul himself *received* this gospel.

You may recognize the language from chapter 11 –

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...”

And Paul insists that this is “of first importance.”

Any time someone says this is “of first importance” –

you should probably take them seriously!

Paul’s list of the things that are “of first importance” is no exception!

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ *that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,* ⁵ *and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.* ⁶ *Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.* ⁷ *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*

The first thing I want you to see here is that for Paul,

the gospel is not the message of how to *become saved*.

The gospel is the message of what Jesus has done for our salvation!

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has done

what we could not possibly have done for ourselves.

Therefore, we repent and believe the gospel!

The gospel is that Christ died for our sins – that he was buried –

that he was raised from the dead on the third day –

and that he appeared to Cephas and the rest!

(all according to the scriptures)

Let’s take them one by one:

a. Christ Died for Our Sins in Accordance with the Scriptures

Paul takes it for granted that you know that you have sinned.

Sometimes people say “Oh, I’m a good person.”

But everyone sins.
We all fall short of God's standard.

As Isaiah had said,
All we like sheep have gone astray – each one has turned to his own way.
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures.

We were dead in our sins –
we had no future – no hope.

But Christ came in the flesh – so that he might take our sin upon himself.

When Paul says “in accordance with the Scriptures” –
he's not necessarily appealing to a particular passage.
He's not saying that there is *one passage* that teaches this.
It's the message of the *whole* scripture!

As Jesus had said in Luke 24:46
“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer
and on the third day rise from the dead,
and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
should be proclaimed in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem”

You'll notice that Paul's outline of what was “delivered to him”
sounds very much like what Jesus said the OT teaches!

First, that the Christ should suffer – or, that Christ died for our sins.

b. Christ Was Buried

Second, that Christ was buried.
The burial of Christ is sometimes overlooked.
But Paul puts it among the things of “first importance.”

Why is the burial of Christ important?
Paul is going to spend the rest of chapter 15
explaining the importance of the resurrection.
The burial of Christ is not “of second importance” –
it is of *first importance* –
because *the body* matters.

The burial of Christ demonstrates that he truly died.
In the early church, there were some heretics who said that Jesus only *seemed* to die.
Paul deals with this right up front by saying – Jesus died – *and was buried!*

Because all of this is heading for Paul's central point, that

c. Christ Was Raised on the Third Day in Accordance with the Scriptures

Some say that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is immaterial!

Herman Bavinck points out that:

“Scripture, however, proceeds from a totally different view.

It teaches that both heaven and earth, spirit and matter, have been created by God;

that the body belongs to the essential being of humans

and in its way exhibits the image of God;

that death is a consequence of and punishment for sin.

For Scripture, then, everything depends on the physical resurrection of Christ.

The that is integral to the how:

if Christ did not arise physically,

then death, then sin, then he who had the power of death

has not been defeated.”

And again, when it says “in accordance with the scriptures” –

the point is not that there is a particular passage that Paul is thinking of.

Rather, it is the *whole* scripture that Paul is thinking of!

The whole story of the OT is incomplete without the bodily resurrection of Jesus!

If our bodies are to be redeemed –

if the material creation is to be redeemed –

then the material creation must be raised up from the death that has come through sin.

The Son of God came in the flesh so that he might raise up our flesh to the right hand of God.

He became all that we are by nature

so that we might become all that he is by grace.

d. Christ Appeared to Cephas and the Twelve, etc.

Christ's appearances to Peter and the 12,

to the 500 brethren and to James –

are all still part of the things *of first importance*.

In the same way that Christ's burial demonstrates the reality of his death –

so also his appearances demonstrate the reality of his resurrection.

Paul points to these 500 brethren who all saw Jesus.

While some had fallen asleep (had died)

you could still go and talk with people who had seen the risen Lord Jesus.

Paul plainly thinks of the resurrection as a *historical event*.

The resurrection of Jesus is, in fact, the *center* of history.

All of history pivots around the bodily resurrection of Christ.

But then Paul adds the “last” thing that belongs among the things “of first importance”:

3. Last of All – Paul and the Apostolic Preaching (v8-11)

⁸ *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

Now, there’s really no good reason to translate this “as to one untimely born.”

I understand why translators do this:

they think that it refers to the fact that Paul was the *last* of the apostles –
but the meaning of the word is pretty straightforward:

it means an abortion – or a miscarriage.

Last of all, as to an aborted foetus, he appeared also to me.

Paul is not saying that he was *late* in being born.

Paul is saying that compared to the rest of the apostles,

I’m a miscarriage.

I’m an abortion.

I don’t deserve to be named among them.

And he explains why in verse 9:

a. The Least of the Apostles

⁹ *For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

I want you to see something about Paul here.

Remember that at the beginning of 1 Corinthians,

Paul objected to how the Corinthians were fighting over who was better:

“I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ!”

Here at the end of 1 Corinthians,

Paul will end the debate.

I am the least of the apostles.

Don’t form parties around me!

Party and faction is the death of the church!

Paul says, Look, I persecuted the church – so I am not worthy of being called an apostle.

But in spite of my unworthiness –

I *am* an apostle!

b. The Grace of God Is Not in Vain

¹⁰ *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

This is the heart of Paul's message:
Grace!

The grace of God is what makes me what I am.
Look, Paul says, I was killing Christians.
I was putting them to death.
But God showed mercy to me.
And his grace toward me was not in vain.

The implication should be clear:
if God can take an abortion like Paul – a miscarriage –
and turn him into an apostle!
then what could God do with you?

By the grace of God I am what I am!
Sure, I've worked hard – I've worked harder than any of the rest of the apostles!
But that's nothing for me to boast about!
It was not I – but the grace of God that is with me!

Notice that for Paul, grace and working hard are not opposed to each other!
Everything in the Christian life is by grace!
Even Paul's hard work!

And so the result is:

c. Whether I or They – So We Preach and So You Believed

¹¹ *Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

The apostles have a single message.
We all preach the same gospel.
Because there is *only one gospel* –
We all preach these things “of first importance” –
the gospel – the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It doesn't make a difference whether it was I or they –
what matters is the message of the gospel!
What matters is that you *believed* the gospel!

You believed the good news of what Jesus has done.