THE GOSPEL OF THE RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Key Verses: 15:3,4

“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…”

Have you ever felt like you had a weak foundation? Not in your house, but in your life. Maybe you didn’t master elementary math, or your vocabulary was weak. Or maybe it was more human—your family was broken or dysfunctional. There are weak human foundations, but even more seriously, there are weak spiritual foundations. What’s a weak spiritual foundation? For a Christian, it’s not having a firm grasp on the gospel—not really knowing the gospel, not really believing the gospel. In today’s passage Apostle Paul reminds us of the same spiritual foundation we Christians all share. We want to think about what this foundation is, why we need it, and how it helps us. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read verse 1. Here Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians of the gospel. In verse 2 he’s going to use the word “gospel” again. In verses 3,4 he’s going to tell us what it actually is. But for now, he emphasizes that *he’s* the one who preached it to them. He adds that he himself received it, and then he passed it on to them as of first importance. Why is Paul emphasizing this? As we saw in the earlier chapters of this letter, some in this church had become critical of Paul. Paul had gotten their church started, but later he left and Apollos came, and they liked Apollos better because he spoke well and knew a lot. So in chapter 4 Paul reminded them that he became their father through the gospel (4:15). He said that by sharing the gospel with them, he was a wise builder who laid the only spiritual foundation there really is—Jesus Christ (3:10,11). People who share the gospel with us and help us personally receive it are the ones who help us build on this same spiritual foundation. Of course our focus needs to be on Jesus. But we also need to remember those who helped us spiritually. It can be hard. Why? It’s not just because we’re forgetful. Some people receive the gospel through listening to the radio, watching tv or reading a book—not really knowing the person explaining it. Also, as we gain more wisdom and knowledge we can lose sight of how we even got started. But remembering how and through whom we received the gospel helps us in connecting with our own spiritual foundation. If we forget those who helped us accept the gospel, we lose our spiritual roots.

Read verse 1 again. Paul says they had received the gospel and taken a stand on it. It was no small matter. It tells us that no one can be passive or evasive: When we hear the gospel, we have to respond. We accept it, repent and make a commitment, and if we don’t, no matter how nice we’re trying to be, we’re actually rejecting it. It’s always hard to take a stand on the gospel. Why? Because it’s never a popular thing to do. We become strange in the eyes of those enjoying the world and the sinful nature. We may lose the relationships of family members and friends. It can be painful and scary. But taking a stand on the gospel is how we make the spiritual foundation in Christ our very own.

Read verse 2. Here Paul says the gospel saves us—on one condition: we have to hold firmly to it. He specifically says to “hold firmly to the word.” The gospel is based not on feelings or impressions but on words. What kind of words? Not human words, but the word of God. Here, “the word” is Bible verses. There are so many Bible verses that tell us about the gospel. We need to know these verses, memorize these verses and hold firmly to them. As we get familiar with Bible verses about the gospel and really hold onto them personally, we’re building on that spiritual foundation that can withstand all kinds of storms of life. There’s really no other way. Many think they’re Christians because they go to church or come from a Christian family, when in fact, they’re not holding firmly to any word. When a crisis or temptation comes, it exposes the weak foundation they have. Without holding firmly to the word, Paul says we believe in vain. Our battle is to hold firmly to God’s word and help others hold firmly to God’s word.

Read verses 3,4. This is the main content of the word we need to hold firmly to: Christ died for our sins, and Christ rose from the dead. The Easter holiday is just two weeks away. Every Easter it’s good to be reminded of this gospel. After receiving and taking a stand on it, we still need to be reminded of it, all throughout our lives. In this gospel we find that we’re all really the same, and we’re all really united. In verse 1 the word “remind” in Greek is literally “know by experience.” It’s not referring to mere information, like reminding somebody of where they left their keys. It’s about reliving or reexperiencing the gospel, as if for the first time. When we’re reminded of Jesus’ death and resurrection, it’s like having a mini-revival in our souls. In our crazy busy world it’s so hard to slow down and really reflect. We pack our lives full of things we *think* are important, but squeeze out time for reflection on what’s *really* important. This Easter let’s all take the time necessary to deeply meditate on Jesus’ death and resurrection.

First of all, let’s think about the word “gospel.” “Gospel” in Greek means “good news.” Jesus’ death and resurrection are the only really good news in the world. Really? Today we might think good news is a cure to the coronavirus, getting us back quickly to “normal life.” But what was that, anyway? More shopping, more busyness, more violence, more distance from family members. Is Jesus’ death and resurrection really our good news? How is that so?

To understand it, we first need to think about the bad news. What’s the bad news? Verse 3 hints at it: it’s our sins. Our own sins are really our “bad news.” There’s a common expression, “That person is bad news.” Why do we say that? It’s because, despite good appearances, the person is notorious for causing trouble. Sin is like that. Sin seems good on the surface, at first, but it turns out really bad. Sin causes trouble not only in our own lives, but in many others’ lives also. There was a young rock star who was so talented and respected. But all the fame and money went to his head. He enjoyed all kinds of sins, abusing people and drugs until he became a helpless addict. Within ten years he became a great burden to his band and ended up going to jail. He never thought sin would destroy his life like that, but it did.

What is sin, anyway? The Greek word is “hamartia.” Literally it means to miss the mark. But the real sense of the word is to be estranged from God, to be cut off, to have a broken relationship with him. Sin cuts us off both from God and from people, and even from ourselves. God made us all in his own image, to be close to him and to be like him, so noble and great, and to do great things with all the wonderful things he gives us. But because of sin we go far away from God and become ignoble and petty. In sin we live in hidden guilt and fear, hatred and shame. In sin we wound others, and we waste our lives on foolish things. Sin makes us do ugly things we know we shouldn’t be doing. In fact, sin enslaves us. Sin makes us powerless and fatalistic and hopeless.

And it gets worse. The Bible says that sin leads to death (Ro6:23a). In fact, all death in the world is not natural, as we commonly think; death is a direct result of sin. It might seem like a relief to just die and be done with all the suffering and struggle of this life. But the Bible also tells us that physical death is not the end. After death comes judgment (Heb9:27). We all have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2Co5:10). When we don’t pass God’s judgment, the Bible says we have to go to the fiery lake of burning sulfur—the second death (Rev21:8). Jesus called it the place of eternal torment, where “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mk9:48). God deals so severely with sin because our God is so holy and just.

But our God who is holy and just is also love. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God gave his Son Jesus to die for our sins. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us (2Co5:21). On the cross Jesus became “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn1:29). He became “the sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Ro3:25). Jesus’ death is the free gift of God’s grace, even to the worst of sinners (Ro6:23b; 1Ti1:15,16). To receive his grace, we just have to hear his word and believe it, and we cross over from death to life (Jn5:24). If we repent and believe that Jesus died for us, we receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). The Holy Spirit gives us power, power to change, power to overcome our sin, power to live as his witnesses (Ac1:8). He transforms the ugly sinful nature within us until we actually take on the beautiful character of our Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes us not proud but humble, and loving and pure like Jesus. The Holy Spirit brings us close to God and close to others.

If Jesus had only died, it would be just another sad story. But read verse 4 again. Why is Jesus’ resurrection good news to us? First of all, it proves that his death was the valid payment for all our sins (Ro4:25). Moreover, Jesus’ resurrection proves that God is living and that his justice will surely prevail. Evil people thought they could kill Jesus and never have to see him again. But Jesus was raised on the third day by the power of God. One day “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him” (Rev1:7). In this world there are many unrighteous judges and so much injustice. But through his resurrection Jesus became the one and only Righteous Judge who will come again to judge the living and the dead (Ac3:14; 22:14; 2Ti4:1; 1Pe4:5). His Second Coming is really good news to those who believe in him. Ultimately, Jesus’ resurrection gives us new birth into the living hope of the kingdom of God (1Pe1:3,4). In this world death makes everything seem so meaningless and all our struggle seem so useless. But the resurrection of Jesus proves that it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Ac2:24), and that death has no power over us, either (1Co15:54–57). The Bible promises that if we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him (2Ti2:11,12). The resurrection of Jesus makes all our labor in the Lord not in vain (15:58). We all need this faith.

In verses 5–8 Paul mentions several resurrection appearances of our Lord Jesus, to confirm it as an undeniable fact. Then he tells his personal story. Read verses 9,10. Paul is again defending his apostleship to his critics. But what does it mean to us? It’s further proof of the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, for only his resurrection could change such a proud, self-righteous man around 180°. It also tells us that the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection fills our lives with his grace, just like it did for Paul. We too become motivated not by greed or guilt but by his grace. We give our lives working hard in his service, only because of his amazing grace.

Read verses 3,4 again. This Easter may God reconnect us with our spiritual foundation in the gospel and revive our souls. May he help us hold firmly to the word of the gospel and use us newly as gospel witnesses in our time.