

The First Importance of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3–11)

By Jacob Gerber

After broaching warnings about the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, Paul lays out the basics of the gospel with absolute clarity in v. 3–11. In this passage, Paul not only lays out the historical facts of the gospel, but also the meaning of those facts and the eyewitness evidence that Jesus Christ has indeed been raised up from the dead. Then, Paul explains the power of the gospel in his own life, which underscores the critical need for keeping the message of the gospel front and center as the focal point of Christian ministry. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, Paul reminds us of the core message of all Christian preaching, that *Christ died, Christ was buried, and Christ was raised up for your sins, in accordance with the Scriptures.*

Delivered and Received, as of First Importance (1 Cor. 15:3a)

As we studied earlier, the language of *delivering* and *receiving* in v. 3a are the words of faithfully handing on a tradition. That is, Paul is asserting that he is faithfully handing on to the Corinthians the firsthand accounts of what those who were present at the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus personally witnessed. We should note, though, that Paul makes a slightly different point elsewhere about how he received the gospel: “For I did not receive it [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). How do these statements fit together? Since Paul uses the same word for “receive” in Galatians 1:12, some argue that we must interpret 1 Corinthians 15:3a to mean that Paul is talking about receiving the gospel from Jesus Christ.¹

It is better, though, to recognize that Paul is primarily emphasizing the *historical facts* of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 (as we will see in v. 3b–8), while he is primarily emphasizing the *doctrine*, or the *interpretation of those facts*, in Galatians 1.² Paul was not an eyewitness observer of the facts, so he was dependent on others to receive their testimony of what took place. Indeed, Paul identifies a number of eyewitnesses in v. 5–7. On the other hand, Paul received an explanation of the significance of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ from none other than Christ himself. These two observations perhaps explain part of the reason why Paul did not write one of the Gospels, but why Paul instead writes the majority of the doctrinal teaching of the New Testament.

Paul says that what he received he also delivered to the Corinthians “as of first importance.” While the word “importance” does not appear in 1 Corinthians 15:3, the ESV’s addition of the word clarifies exactly the meaning of the Greek phrase “in the first” as describing the “principal things” of the gospel.³ What are these “principal things” that Paul stresses to us: the historical facts of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, in accordance with the Scriptures.

¹ e.g., Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 683–84.

³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

Historical Facts and their Enduring Significance (1 Cor. 15:3b–4)

In what follows, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he had taught them, “as of first importance,” about the gospel. Each of the statements from v. 3b–5 are linked by the word “and,” demonstrating that these details stand together as a unified gospel message.⁴ Here, Paul gives a basic summary of the facts of the gospel, and the significance of those facts, in what amounts to one of the earliest creedal statements.⁵ So, Paul begins with a basic fact: “Christ died...” (v. 3b). Then, Paul explains the significance of this event: “Christ died *for our sins*...” Christ did not merely die, but his death had a purpose, “that by taking our curse upon him he might redeem us from it. For what else was Christ’s death, but a sacrifice for expiating our sins — what but a satisfactory penalty, by which we might be reconciled to God — what but the condemnation of one, for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness for us?”⁶ This is the doctrine of *substitutionary atonement*, that Christ died in our place, condemned for our sins, so that he might endure God’s wrath in our behalf, and so that we might be forgiven.

In addition to this doctrine about the significance of Christ’s death, Paul adds one more point: “Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*...” Not only did Christ die, and not only did Christ die for our sins, but his atoning, sacrificial death for us was foretold by the Old Testament Scriptures. Although there are specific passages of the Old Testament where Christ’s death is foretold with particular clarity (e.g., Ps. 22; Isa. 53), the Old Testament is brimming with promises, types, and shadows that the Christ must suffer and die for the sins of his people (e.g., Gen. 3:15; 15:17; 22:1–19; 37:32; Ex. 12:1–50; Lev. 1; 16; etc.). Thus, the New Testament everywhere teaches that Christ’s death was predicted in the Old Testament.⁷

In v. 4, Paul tells us that Christ “was buried.” There are probably two reasons for mentioning explicitly that Christ was buried. First, the burial of Christ “functions to verify the reality of the death. In the present context it emphasizes the fact that a dead corpse was laid in the grave, so that

⁴ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 338.

⁵ “Creeds perform a double role both as *declarations of a theological content* and as *self-involving personal commitments*, like nailing up one’s colors (see Neufeld, *Earliest Christian Confessions*). As an article of faith this very early creed ranks as *first and foremost*: it has first importance.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 256.)

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

⁷ “That the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice was predicted by the law and the prophets is the constant doctrine of the New Testament. Our Lord reproved his disciples for not believing what the prophets had spoken on this subject, Luke 24 25. 26. Paul protested before Festus, that in preaching the gospel he had said ‘none other things than those which Moses and the prophets say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles,’ Acts 26, 22. 23. He assured the Romans that his gospel was ‘witnessed (to) by the law and the prophets,’ Rom. 3. 21. The epistle to the Hebrews is an exposition of the whole Mosaic service as a prefiguration of the office and work of Christ. And the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is the foundation of all the New Testament exhibitions of a suffering and atoning Messiah. Paul and all other faithful ministers of the gospel, therefore, teach that atonement for sin, by the death of Christ, is the great doctrine of the whole word of God.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312–13.)

the resurrection that follows will be recognized as an objective reality, not merely a ‘spiritual’ phenomenon, a phantasm of some kind.”⁸ Secondly, the tomb in which Christ was buried also functions as the backdrop to the resurrection. The first announcement of Christ’s resurrection happened not in the place where the disciples were staying, but in the tomb where Christ’s lifeless body had lain (e.g., Luke 24:1–12).

Next, Paul states that Christ “was raised on the third day....” To die and to be buried is the fate of all humankind; however, Christ’s death was unique in that he was raised back to life from the dead. The grammar of the first two verbs, “died” and “was buried,” described completed actions (aorist), but this verb, “was raised,” describes a completed action with ongoing effects (perfect).⁹ While Christ *did* truly die, and he *was* truly buried, he does not remain so. By contrast, Christ remains *raised up* from the dead even now, and forever into the future.¹⁰ The passive nature of the verb “was raised” points to the *Father’s* role in raising his Son from the dead; however, this point should not be stressed too far. The Bible teaches that all three persons of the Trinity were involved in raising up Christ from the dead: God the Father (Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15; Gal. 1:1; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10), the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11), and even the Son himself (John 10:17–18).¹¹ Furthermore, this was not a mere resuscitation after a brief pause of his heartbeat, but a resurrection that took place much later, “on the third day,” when no human measures for restoring life would be possible.

As with the death of Christ for our sins, Paul adds the phrase, “in accordance with the Scriptures” to describe the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Where, though, do the Scriptures teach that the Christ would rise from the dead? Most frequently, the apostles pointed to Psalm 16:10 and Psalm 110:1 as texts that foretold the resurrection of the Messiah (cf. Acts 2:25–36).¹² Beyond these clear statements, the New Testament writers saw the sparing of Isaac as a foreshadowing of the resurrection (e.g., Heb. 11:19), perhaps even so far as noting the reference to “the third day” in

⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 805.

⁹ The third clause is expressed with a different tense of the verb: *and that...he was raised* (ἐγήγερται, perfect). In contrast with *died* (ἀπέθανεν), and *was buried* (ἐτάφη), both of which are aorist tenses, the new clause suggests both that the raising happened, and that it remains in force. Christ died, but he is not dead; he was buried, but he is not in the grave; he was raised, and he is alive now....” (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 340.)

¹⁰ “Thus [perfect tense of *was raised*], the confessional formula does not just narrate past events: It proclaims Christ as risen Lord.” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 257.)

¹¹ *Contra* Thiselton, who insists that “Only in John does Jesus speak of his hypothetical power to raise himself, but even in John he does not suggest that this will be the efficient cause of the resurrection event (cf. John 6:39, 40, 54)...Further, if this were otherwise, our comments above concerning the experience of death as ‘nothingness,’ a yielding of the self into the hands of God alone, would not apply to the death of Jesus Christ. But patently this *was* the character of Christ’s death. Resurrection springs from God’s promise, God’s power, God’s act of re-creation, and God’s grace—and this alone.” (Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 258.) Thiselton overlooks John 10:17–18, where Jesus states that *he* will raise up his own life after laying it down. More seriously, Thiselton seems to overlook the fact that Jesus Christ is human *and* God. *God*, in a unified act of the Father, the Holy Spirit, *and* the Son, raised up Jesus Christ from the dead.

¹² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 807.

Genesis 22:4.¹³ Also, the story of Joseph’s “death” at the hands of his brothers eventually led to his exaltation to the right hand of Pharaoh was widely recognized as a foreshadowing of the messiah (Gen. 37:32; 41:40).¹⁴ Jesus himself compared Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish to his the three days and three nights that he would spend in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40; cf. Jon. 1:17). A few other Old Testament texts also speak of God’s deliverance from death and destruction “on the third day” (2 Kgs. 20:5; Hos. 6:2).¹⁵ Rather than identifying any one text, Paul seems to be pointing to the *collective* witness of *all* these texts from the Old Testament as pointing forward to the resurrection of Christ on the third day, “in accordance with the Scriptures.”

Christ’s Post-Resurrection Appearances (1 Cor. 15:5–7)

The final element of historical facts has less to do with an *accomplishment* of Christ, and more to do with the *proof* of what Christ had accomplished: Christ *appeared* (or, “was seen”) by hundreds of people after his resurrection from the dead (v. 5–8). Paul is not merely asserting that Christ was raised from the dead; he is appealing to the testimony of a great number of witnesses who can verify the facts.¹⁶

Without explaining why, Paul omits any reference to the women who first saw the resurrected Christ at the tomb (c.f., Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1–11; John 20:1–18).¹⁷ In verse 5, Paul goes straight to the appearances of Jesus to Peter, and then to “the twelve.” By “the twelve,” Jesus clearly means the disciples, even though one of those twelve had already died by suicide (Matt. 27:3–10).¹⁸ Verse 6 is particularly intriguing, since Paul speaks of an event when Christ appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time.

The New Testament does not explicitly record such an event; however, a good case may perhaps be made that this event took place in Galilee, at the giving of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:10, 16–20).¹⁹ While Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in Jerusalem as they awaited the giving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4), Jesus also commanded the disciples to meet him at some point in Galilee (Mark 14:28). If there were only 120 believers in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15), the other 380+ witnesses

¹³ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 304.

¹⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2014), 37, 43, 57. For more on this point, see my meditation on Genesis 41 here: <https://freedailybiblestudy.com/february-8th-bible-meditation-genesis-41/>

¹⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 807.

¹⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 314.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

¹⁸ “But as we know, that there were twelve in number that were set apart by Christ’s appointment, though one of them had been expunged from the roll, there is no absurdity in supposing that the name was retained. On this principle, there was a body of men at Rome that were called Centumviri, while they were in number 102. By the *twelve*, therefore, you are simply to understand the chosen Apostles.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10–11. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>)

¹⁹ For the following arguments, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 636–37.

were perhaps already in Galilee. The wide open spaces of Galilee would have made a meeting with the Lord easier than trying to meet with 500 in the confines of Jerusalem. Still, we must acknowledge that this is a speculative guess, since the New Testament does not tell us when and where this event took place. At the time he wrote this, most of these witnesses were still alive, although even by that time some had died (v. 6). Paul, however, does not describe them as “dead,” but merely as having “fallen asleep.” Like the death of Christ, their deaths will not be permanent, but only a time of sleep until Christ returns to awaken them from the dead.²⁰ Their testimony lives on in this letter as one of the strongest documented proofs of the resurrection of Christ that we have to this day.

In v. 7, Paul mentions an appearance to “James,” which may refer to James the Apostle, the brother of John, but, more likely, probably refers to James the brother of Jesus, a leader in the church Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19).²¹ The phrase “all the apostles” in v. 7 probably includes “the twelve,” but probably also refers to a larger group of apostles beyond those original twelve (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Thess. 2:6 (cf. 1:1)).²² The resurrected Christ appeared to a great number of reliable witnesses.

Christ’s Grace Toward Paul (1 Cor. 15:8–10)

Last of all, Paul says that Christ appeared to him, “as to one untimely born” (v. 8). It is possible that this word refers to a premature birth, as the ESV translates it; however, it is more likely that Paul refers to himself as an abortion, or a miscarried/stillborn child. The word Paul uses (ἔκτρομα, *ektrōma*) literally means “from a wound” (from τρῶμα/τραῦμα, from which we get our word *trauma*), and refers to a child born dead, whether by a deliberate action (abortion) or without any deliberate action (miscarriage).²³ Paul is stating that he was in this awful, pitiful, and even *dead* position when Christ appeared to him.²⁴ Paul supplies the reason for describing himself in such graphic terms in the next verse: “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (v. 9). Paul is the *least* not merely because he was the *last* chosen, but he is also least in “rank and dignity” because of his actions.²⁵

Christ chooses Paul, then, not *because* of Paul’s worthiness, but *in spite of* it. Thus, Paul says that “by the grace of God I am what I am” (v. 10). Paul’s call to be an apostle of Jesus comes not by his merit, but by God’s grace. Paul insists, though, that the grace of God was not (or, better, “was not found”)²⁶ “in vain” or “empty.” That is, God’s grace produced abundant fruit in Paul’s life, so that he worked harder than any of the others in service to the Lord. Nevertheless, Paul takes no credit for

²⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 689–90.

²¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 316.

²² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 638.

²³ “ἔκτρομα,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 157.

²⁴ He was tantamount to an ἔκτρομα *when* Christ appeared to him, not afterward. If he means by this that he was something embryonic and unfit for life, then his life could be sustained only by divine intervention....If he means that he was an aborted fetus or a stillborn child, which is more likely, then he is referring to his state of wretchedness as an unbeliever and persecutor of the church.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 693.)

²⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 317.

²⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 641.

this work: “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” John Calvin well summarizes Paul’s outlook on this, writing, “Let us learn, therefore, that we have nothing that is good, but what the Lord has graciously given us, that we do nothing good but what he *worketh in us*, (Philippians 2:13) — not that we do nothing ourselves, but that we do nothing without being influenced — that is, under the guidance and impulse of the Holy Spirit.”²⁷

The Gospel Preached and Believed (1 Cor. 15:11)

Regardless of the different path that Paul took from the others to whom Christ also appeared, Paul insists that their message has been the same about the gospel of Christ: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor. 15:11). From the very first Easter Sunday all the way to the present day, Christ’s death and resurrection has been the core message of the preaching of all faithful ministers, and the core beliefs of all faithful believers.²⁸

Discussion Questions

1. What is the gospel? How does Paul’s explanation of the gospel here in 1 Corinthians 15 differ from ways the word “gospel” is sometimes used in the world, and even in the church? Why are the historical events of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection so important? Why is the doctrine that Christ’s work was for our sins, and in accordance with the Scriptures, so important? How would you make use of this passage to share the gospel with someone?
2. What do we learn about the power of the gospel from Paul’s own story of his salvation and his call as an apostle? Where did Paul begin, when Christ first called him? How did the gospel transform him? What is the role of grace in Paul’s conversion and calling? What would you say to someone struggling with fear about being too sinful for God to save? How does Paul’s story offer solid hope in the gospel to even the vilest of sinners?
3. What does Paul teach us about the ongoing place and role of the gospel in the church (v. 11)? In what ways is the church tempted to drift from the centrality of the gospel? In what ways are individual Christians tempted to drift from faith in the gospel? Where are you most personally tempted to reject, or to drift from, the gospel? How might this passage as a whole prompt you to repent and believe in Christ for the first time, or once again?

²⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 14–16. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

²⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 318.