

**THE MAIN THING**  
**1 Cor. 15:1-7**

Turn to 1 Cor. 15...

Author George Orwell once wrote, "Sometimes, the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious."

Someone once asked theologian Charles Ryrie how it was that he taught and wrote with such clarity. – Ryrie answered, 'The main thing is to always keep the main thing as the main thing'.

Today we come to a text that gives us Paul's clear answer to what was the main thing for him, and what should be the main thing for every man, woman, boy or girl alive today.

Stand & Read text (vv. 1-11) & Pray:

Give title; only covering up to v. 7 today...

~ Jerry Bridges, "The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only *essential message* in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it."

~ John Stott, "All around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp on the gospel, fumbling it, and in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether."

*Antioch, HOW do we make sure that doesn't happen to us? – HOW do YOU make sure you're not the next mediocre Christian whose life revolves around something *other* than the gospel? – HOW do we make sure we don't just become another distracted church that *sidelines* the gospel (in exchange for 100 other good-but-lesser things)?*

**\*TWO REASONS why the gospel must have 1<sup>st</sup> place and centre-stage in the church & in everything:**

**1. vv. 1-2, Because of what the gospel DOES!**

*THREE GLORIOUS THINGS the gospel does:*

**a. The gospel SAVES**

vv. 1-2a – HOW ELSE do you explain the existence of a Christian church in pagan Corinth? – Recall their background. – Not exactly a handsome bunch of religious, moral citizens. – Chp. 6, "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers...such were some of you!" (vv. 9-11).

Talk about a chequered past, talk about carrying around a lot of potential baggage?...

HOW did God save such a filthy people?

Through “preaching” (3x in today’s passage). – As Paul told us back in chp. 1, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to use who are being saved it is the power of God. ...God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (v. 21).

Likewise here: 15:1-2a, 11...

HOW ELSE do you explain their testimony? – I.e., ‘Not long ago, you were down the street at the Temple of Apollo, bowing down to idols. Not long ago, you were up on the Acropolis fornicating at Aphrodite’s house of worship.’

‘NOW you’re here, in a Christian Church, called out from the world, gathered with God’s people, worshipping the only true & living God. There’s no other explanation for this but the Gospel! How else could such a story be told? If the Gospel hasn’t put you here, what has?!’...

### **b. The gospel SUSTAINS**

NOT ONLY the existence of this Corinthian church proved Jesus’ resurrection, but also their survival! – Amidst all of the worldliness and immaturities & confusion & division? – Amidst the hypocrites and false teachers that infiltrate the church, how does *any church* ever survive? –

ONLY by, vv. 1-2, hearing & receiving this gospel and standing & holding fast to it. – Otherwise, the Christian Church would’ve become extinct long ago (nothing more than a fossil to be examined).

[~ Says one preacher: *Paul was ashamed of much of what these Corinthians did and did not do, but he was not ashamed to call them brethren (v. 1a).*

*...Critics have denounced the resurrection as a hoax and fabrication, but have never explained the power of such a fabrication to produce men and women who gave up everything, including their freedom and lives when necessary, to love and to follow a [Lord they knew to be dead]! His living church is evidence that Christ Himself is alive; and He could be alive only if He had been raised from the dead. (J. Mac)]*

~ As my grandpa used to say, ‘If Christianity was not a divine religion, it would have died out long ago at the hands of its friends.’

[Repeat: vv. 1-2a...]

### **c. The gospel SANCTIFIES**

v. 1a – What?! – Why ‘make the gospel known to “BRETHREN”’, to fellow believers? – They know it already, don’t they; else how would they be saved? – True, HOWEVER:

WHY was Corinth such a *worldly church*? – chp. 1-4, why so divided? – Chps. 5-7, why suing each other and why so much sexual immorality & divorce? – Chps. 8-10, why hanging out at idol temples and abusing their Christian liberties?;

chp. 11, why confusion about gender roles, and selfishness at the Lord’s Table? – Chps. 12-14, why such abuse of spiritual gifts instead of building up the body in love? – Why such an impure, messed up church?

*Because they had forgotten the gospel. – They were losing their grip on the gospel's purifying, sanctifying power.*

*They'd stopped preaching the gospel to themselves and to one another. – They started assuming the gospel instead of treasuring it and talking about it and obeying it. –*

They had lost their amazement over the news of a God who saves sinners. – They had lost their awe at God sacrificing His very own Son in the place of vile rebels.

Repeat: v.1a...

→Did you know that Christians need to hear the gospel as *much as non-Christians*? – That's right. – Turn over to: Rom. 1:7a ("saints"), yet v. 15...

Of course Paul was anxious to evangelise the lost, and so must we be! – But Paul *was also anxious* to preach the gospel to the Church as well..

Think of how often in Paul's epistles he rehearses gospel truth *for believers*: Eph. 1-3, all gospel!; Col. 1-2; Rom. 1-11, pure gospel! – Cf back to 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:2...

Paul knew of NO better and NO other way to motivate believers. – There was NO catalyst for Christian living and for a healthy church like that of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Cf. 15:1... NB v. 1d, "in which you STAND", our bedrock & foundation, the ground & soil of our entire Christian life.

→From Mahaney: *We never move on from the gospel, we only move further into the gospel.* (repeat)

We never graduate from the gospel; it's not just one class or room, it's the whole school & campus of the Christian life! – All of life is lived 'within the walls of the glorious gospel!' – We don't matriculate into 'deeper things' and leave the gospel behind. –

→First book I require for our interns to read: Mahaney, *Living the Cross-Centred Life*. – Another book that is always within my arms reach: Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer*

v. 2b – As we say, "We're saved by faith alone; but the faith that saves is never alone." – True faith will persevere, will endure, will hang on and hang in there. – False faith will not, and will peter out sooner or later. – Like a King Saul, or a Judas, or a Demas as portrayed in Scripture.

A true Christian could never lose their salvation. – Eternal life is eternal, not temporary. – But HOW does God keep us saved??...

BY enabling us to endure, and BY warning us through passages like here in 1 Cor. 15 and elsewhere:

Heb. 3:14, "For we have become partakers of Christ, IF we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm UNTIL the end."

John 8:31, “So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.’”

Col. 1:23, “[God] has now reconciled you”, saved you, “IF indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard....” (Cf. 2 Pet. 1:10; Matt. 10:22; 1 Cor. 15:58, chp ends as it began)

→NB, *we are not saved because we persevere. – We persevere because we are saved already.* –

Bearing fruit & enduring are not something added to faith; they are inherent in saving faith, in the gift itself of true faith & repentance that God gives to every true believer.

+ Just like the entire oak tree is contained in the seed itself. –

“We’re saved by faith alone; but the faith that saves is never alone”. It is not mere agreement or mental assent; true faith is an active, living, breathing, obeying & persevering thing! – Saving faith will have a pulse, will have vital signs, should be obvious & unmistakable!

v. 2c – HOW would you know if you “believed in vain”?? – Cf. v. 14... More on this next time...

## **2. vv. 3-7, Because of what the gospel SAYS!**

v. 3a – NB, v. 3, “delivered...received” = standard language in the ancient world for handing down sacred tradition, for passing on a very valuable ‘baton’. –

I.e., Paul says, ‘I didn’t drop the gospel. It was given to me by the risen Lord. I passed it on to you, and v. 1a, you “received” it, and you’ve still got it. But make sure you don’t drop it, or fail to pass it down to the next generation!’ (as we saw last week in Jude 3, “the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints”)

I.e., this wasn’t cooked up by the human imagination; it wasn’t devised by the minds of men; it was revealed by God and delivered by His Son!

v. 3a – ...as of first importance what I also received, that: How might we complete that sentence today? – What else are we tempted to insert here as top priority: [repeat v. 3a, “...that:”]

‘Re: spiritual gifts, you must be a cessationist, or a continuationist; that you must have a certain view on counselling, or creationism, or end times, or homeschooling, or Bible versions, or a favt denomination, or preacher, or other label??’

No; repeat: v. 3...

OR, ‘That: you must be successful, work hard, be a good Christian, marry the right person, get a good education.’ – OR a certain ethnicity, education, culture...

OR, ‘That: your church must have a certain kind of music, certain programs, or some preferred method of Communion, small groups, outreach, prayer, discipleship, etc.’??

No; repeat: v. 3...

BUT aren't all of those things important?! – Indeed they are, and the Bible speaks about all of them. – But the Bible does NOT treat them all as equally important. – In fact, the Bible treats them all as LESS important than this: v. 3...

SINCE WHEN are we allowed to rank biblical subjects & doctrines? Isn't the whole Bible inspired & God-breathed?

Indeed it is! – But Paul is telling us that some parts of our Bible are MORE important than others. – There is a hierarchy of truths in Scripture, there is a ranking, and here is what tops the list: v. 3...

+ Write a book called *Left Behind*, about the end times, and it becomes a best-selling series and you'll make millions. – But write a book on the most important doctrine of all, the gospel of Christ, and you battle to sell a few thousand copies. – WHY is that? –

*Because Satan learned long ago that the good is the enemy of the best, and that the best way to eclipse what is most important is by crowding it out with lots of less important but still good things!*

~ Paul Washer notes, 'You'll understand end times perfectly once it happens, but you'll pass through all eternity and never fathom the depths of the gospel!'

+ Paul is doing TRIAGE here, like a emergency surgeon when the accident victims are brought in after a terrible bus crash: 'OK, all these will have to wait – concussions, scrapes, bruises, cuts, etc. But these are critical – vital signs, head injury, heavy bleeding, etc.'...

#### **a. vv. 3b-4a, Christ died & was buried**

For our sins – Here is Paul's theological explanation of the historical facts. – See, many other victims died on Roman crosses in those times, and thousands were surely crucified in & around Jerusalem.

But of only ONE victim could this be said – that He was not dying for His own sins, that in fact He was totally innocent. – Of only ONE crucified man could it ever be rightly said that He was not just dying for a political cause or a tribal or ethnic.

Only of the Lamb of God, Jesus, could this be said: v. 3 – "OUR sins", Jew & Gentile alike, young & old, men & women, rich & poor, slave & free – "for our sins".

→Beloved, BEWARE: You can accept or believe that Jesus died, but not understand why, or never see YOUR need, personally, for His atoning death.

These 5 words form the very heart of the gospel, the core of Christianity: "Christ died for our sins". – We call this *penal, substitutionary* atonement:

"penal" b/c Christ was suffering the legal penalty, that He was actually taking God's wrath in our place.

“substitutionary” b/c Christ was dying in the place of, on behalf of, us guilty sinners.  
– Jesus suffered a vicarious death, meaning as our representative, instead of us.

→ You might say, ‘Of course, Tim, we know that. We may not use big words like ‘penal, substitutionary’ or ‘vicarious’, but we know Jesus died for our sins on the cross.’ –

Great, but you need to realise: The reason some of those big words have become necessary is because Satan has worked so hard to confuse Christians about the true meaning of the cross.

Especially in the past 150 years, German theological liberalism has ravaged seminaries & Bible schools across the world, including all over S. Africa. – Liberals say that we must move away from that traditional, harsh, cruel view of the cross. – They deny such a “blood cross religion” that says ‘God had to arrange a killing at Calvary in order to forgive sin’. No Father would ever punish His own Son like that!’, they say.

Instead, they say, ‘The cross was just a demonstration of how much God loves us, and of how we should love one another.’

+ Wonder if this debate about substitutionary atonement is still relevant today? – Very. – The Social Gospel of the 1960s & 70s denied it. – The Emergent Church of recent years revived that same denial of penal substitution. – Plus here two other examples of how carefully we must be to never lose our grip on the true meaning of the cross:

(a) It was a denial of the necessity of the cross as satisfying God’s wrath that caused Southern Baptist professors to be fired & ousted from their seminaries in the 1980s and 90s when the Conservative Resurgence (led by Patterson, Mohler, Dever, etc.) exposed their error.

(b) Just in recent weeks, the liberal Presbyterian Church in the States, known as the PC-USA, appealed to Stuart Townend & Keith Getty to change the words to their beloved hymn, “In Christ Alone”.

Why? – Because of one line: “on the cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied”. – Instead, they wanted to change it to “the love of God was magnified”. – See any problem with that?! – Absolutely! – That doesn’t magnify God’s love, it shrinks it! –

What magnifies God’s love is when we realise that His grace paid the price that His holy justice demanded for sin, and that in His very own dear Son. – God’s love is magnified when we understand the meaning behind that anguished cry of Jesus on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Thankfully, Townend & Getty stood firm and refused to deny the gospel.

But these are the dangerous times in which we live, where the gospel is always under attack. – And it’s usually a subtle attack, a rear ambush, not a frontal assault. – People are always trying to adjust, tinker, tweak, or soften the gospel. – But against all of this Paul declares: v. 3...!

→ My lost friend: WHO will pay for your sins? – Who will take off of your back that horrible burden of sin & guilt you bear (even if you deny or ignore it)?...

died...according to the Scriptures? = Boy, where do we start?! – The whole OT points to the need for a perfect Sacrifice who would come. –

From Adam & Eve wearing the skin garments of a slain animal to cover their shame, to Abraham offering up Isaac on Mt. Moriah, to the Exodus from Egypt where only the lamb's blood on the doorpost would cause God's wrath to pass-over. –

And the whole OT sacrificial system shows that sin brings death, and that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin'. –

The priests of the OT were like butchers, knee-deep in blood. The whole OT cries out for a better blood, a better lamb, a better priest, a better sacrifice that would once-and-for-all take away our sin!

And of course, key Psalms (Ps. 22 & 69) and prophecies, esp. Isa. 53, showed that only God's Suffering Servant, only Messiah, could be that perfect sacrifice for our sins.

→Remember, the OT was THE Bible of the early church. – It was the only Scriptures they had. – And they knew it was also a Christian book. – They knew what the disciples on the Emmaus Road learned firsthand from Jesus, that the OT is full of road signs & landmarks that point to Jesus (Lk. 24:25-27). –

Beloved, are you learning to see Christ in the OT. – Does reading the OT make you love Jesus more? – It should!...

v. 4a – This proved that Jesus did not merely faint or swoon. – He actually died and was put in a rich man's tomb, that of Joseph of Arimathea.

(NB, there is no other faith like ours. – At the end of the day, everything hinges, not on Jesus' life or example or teaching, but on the END of His life, the last week, the final days – everything hinges on this – these final historical events upon which the entire Church is now founded & built.)

#### **b. Christ was raised & appeared**

Did you know this is the *earliest written account* of Jesus' resurrection? – Before Matthew, Mark, Luke or John picked up their pen, Paul was the first to tell the story, just some 20 yrs after it happened. – And we have it right here, in our hands, nearly 2,000 yrs later!

Most scholars believe that Paul is borrowing here from a beloved creed or confession of the early church, summed up in these four lines, these *four great events* in history that form the basis of the Christian faith: 'Christ died, was buried, was raised, and appeared'!

NB, the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> lines seem to support the headlines of the 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> lines, which are both followed by "according to Scripture".

v. 4b – Now Paul comes to his main point & premise for this entire chapter: 'the victim of Calvary is now loose and at large'! – The tomb is empty, the grave clothes have been left folded. – As the angel said to the grieving women that sunrise morning (Lk. 24): "Why do you seek the Living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen!"

Question: What if Jesus had risen on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day or 4<sup>th</sup> day? – Amazing miracle; but means Jesus lied. – He might be alive again, but He's a false prophet – big problem. – Because in the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly prophesied that He would rise “on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day”.

This was also according to the Scriptures = Where? – Jesus spoke of the “sign of Jonah”, who was ‘resurrected’ from the belly of the fish on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. – In Acts, both Peter & Paul loved to refer to Ps. 16 as prophetic & messianic in pointing to Jesus’ resurrection. –

The Jewish festival of the firstfruits also pointed to Christ (v. 20), the “first fruits of those who are asleep”. – And the whole hope of the OT was that death could not conquer God’s saving plan for His people.

NB, 2x now Paul has said the Gospel is “according to Scripture”. – The early church did not see the Gospel as a NEW message, or some advance or improvement on the past. –

NO, what they loved about the Gospel was that it was so OLD, that its roots went so DEEP into the OT Scriptures, that Christ came to fulfil prophecy, as the climax & culmination of God’s ancient plan! (Jesus’ coming did not contradict any Jewish belief, but in fact only fulfilled it all!)

They knew that, with the coming of Christ, they were not living in the ‘first’ days, but the ‘last days’, the days of God’s final & complete revelation in His Son, Jesus! (Heb. 1:1-4, etc.)

BUT HOW CAN WE BE SO SURE? – We live in an age that loves to doubt anything & everything. – So how could we ever know that this crucified Jesus walked out of His own tomb alive again?! – ANY eyewitnesses to prove it?...

Paul is emphatic about this. – He musters a whole line-up of witnesses. – It’s not intended to be complete; but it is convincing. – He summons for us *SIX DIFFERENT groups of (or individual) eyewitnesses*:

**(a)** v. 5a, to Cephas = Peter, as the first of the Twelve to see Jesus. Jesus made a point of restoring Peter who had denied Christ those 3x and had wept so bitterly. – Yet Peter was to play the leading role at Pentecost and in the founding of the Church, so Jesus appears first to Peter.

Then...

**(b)** v. 5b, to the Twelve = Collectively, as a group, this was their name, even if Judas now missing. –

John 20:19-20, On that 1<sup>st</sup> Lord’s Day evening, “when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” (or if time, read longer text in Lk. 24:36-44)

Their Master was preparing them to be foundation stones of the Church and to be His martyrs & witnesses to the ends of the earth.



**(c)** v. 6..., i.e., 500 at once = The Gospels don't say for sure; just shows you how much more happened beyond what we know, how much more evidence there was! – This could've been right before Jesus ascended back into Heaven (Matt 28). –

This crowd proves Jesus' resurrection was no hallucination, or deception, or just some private vision of devout saints. – How could 500 people together fall for such a thing, and still be willing to vouch for it years later?! (I.e., 'Here we are some 20 yrs. later, and these witnesses are well known in the Christian world. So check it out for yourself; cross-examine them if you'd like, it's the real deal!')

**(d)** v. 7a, James = Probably to Jesus' half-brother James, who was at first "did not believe in Him" (Jn. 7:2-9, along with Jesus' other brothers). – But God loves to save sceptics, and this may have been what did it: James being confronted firsthand with his risen brother, the Lord Jesus! – James became a key leader of the Jerusalem church and authored the epistle of James.

**(e)** v. 7b, all the apostles = In this context, it probably refers again to the Twelve, as Paul sums up that entire 40 days of Jesus' resurrection appearances.. – v. 5 spoke of Jesus' first resurrection appearance to them. –

Here, like a bookend, Paul probably has in mind Jesus' last appearance just before His Ascension (Acts 1:11). – There it was that He commissioned them to be His "apostles", His "sent-ones" to the ends of the earth (once the Spirit came). – The last recorded words they heard from Jesus on earth: Acts 1:8...

Right after that, before their very eyes, Jesus was taken up in the clouds.

**(f)** v. 8, to Paul – Will have to wait for next time!...

As Paul once declared to Festus (Acts 26:26), "this has not been done in corner". – Christ's resurrection is one of the most well-established, well-documented facts in the ancient world.

(NB, Paul starts & ends with God's two apostolic point-men for the early church: Peter & Paul, the two human heroes & preachers of the Book of Acts.)

Luke, the great historian, sums it up in these words: "To these [the apostles, v. 2] Christ also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3)

~ "The Four Gospels cannot explain the resurrection; it is the resurrection which explains the Gospels." – i.e. if Christ was still in the grave, none of us would've ever known or cared who Matt, Mark, Luke or John was, b/c there'd be no gospel, no good news, nothing to share!...

CONCL. – Repeat points...

→Fundamentally, the gospel is NOT about what God has done just for me or for you. – It is about what God has done in history, for the world. – The Gospel begins, not with subjective experience, but with objective, historical facts.

We have not preached the Gospel when we have only told our personal testimony, or just told some nice stories about Jesus. – Preaching the Gospel must include & revolve around what it revolves around in the Four Gospels – around the life, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth!...

~ 'It is Christ's story that gives meaning to our life, not our story giving meaning to Christ's life.' (C&R)

+ MacArthur tells the story of: *A Christian was walking through an art gallery in Glasgow, Scotland and he came upon a small boy gazing at a particular painting of the crucifixion. He stood and watched the little fellow for a moment and then he walked up and laid his hand on his shoulder and he said, "Son, what is that a picture of?" "Why, Sir," said the lad, "don't you know? That's our Lord dying on a cross and bearing our sin."*

*The man patted the boy on the shoulder and said, "Thank you, Son." And then he walked on and continued to look at the remaining pictures in the gallery.*

*Suddenly he felt a little tug at his sleeve and he looked down and there was the same little fellow. The boy looked up and said, "Pardon me, Sir, I forget to tell you one thing. He's not dead anymore, He arose." (J. Mac)*

HOW important, how central, is the gospel?

In eternity past – it was the main thing: 'the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world', 'foreknown, predestined, elected', Jn. 17, Father's plan to give a redeemed people, a bride, to His Son...

In history – the hinge of everything, "in the fullness of times", in these last days, God spoke in His Son...

In eternity future – the gospel will be the main thing: Rev. 5, with the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders, each holding a harp and a golden bowl full of incense, our prayers!, and they fell down before the Lamb & sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe & tongue & people & nation."

PRAY