

## **OF FIRST IMPORTANCE**

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8

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The church family was very excited about the new pastor that had been called to serve their congregation, especially after he had delivered his first sermon. They were looking forward with great expectation the following Sunday when he climbed into the pulpit, but were disappointed and confused. He preached the same sermon. Well they thought, "He's a young man, and after all this is his first church. Perhaps he just couldn't come up with a good topic to share with us this Sunday." However, after the pastor stood up and preached the same identical sermon on the third Sunday, the leaders of the church decided that it was time for a meeting with this young minister of the gospel. They asked, "Why have you preached the same sermon three weeks in a row." In response, the pastor said, "Why gentlemen, you haven't done anything about the first one I preached. Once you do, I'll move on to the second."

Paul might have been feeling very much the same way as he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. He had faithfully preached the gospel to them. In fact, that's precisely what he says in the opening verses of chapter 15. He wrote, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand." However, their understanding and commitment to this gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, had become a bit wobbly. So it was time to remind them once again of the essentials of their faith. "Otherwise," as Paul said, "you have believed in vain."

So what was it that had raised such a note of concern in Paul's mind and heart? It was the appearance of a heresy that was even now creeping into the life of the church, a heresy that arose out of contemporary Greek culture. Biblical scholars have given it a name called "Gnosticism." Briefly stated it was the belief that Jesus had never existed as a real human being. He was a spiritual hallucination that only appeared to be human. In fact, his feet never even really touched the ground, because everything in this world is tainted and evil and Jesus, who was perfect, would never have condescended to be a part of such a substandard existence. Therefore, Jesus never experienced death, was never buried in a tomb, and most assuredly never arose from the dead. As strange as that might seem, that's what at least some of the Corinthians believed, and this false notion that denied the humanity of Christ was tearing the church apart. So Paul had to set the record straight. What he needed to share with them was "of first importance," and that is exactly what follows in verses three through eight. Let's take a look at them, especially verses three through five.

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians that what he is about to tell them predates even his own conversion to Christianity. It goes all the way back to eyewitness accounts of those who knew Christ. He had received this information from them personally and now he is going to tell these Corinthians once again what those eyewitnesses had said to him. In other words he wasn't making up this story. It was not a fairy tale. On several occasions, Paul had met with leaders of the Early Church, people like Peter and James, and evidently was instructed by them regarding the basics of Christianity. In fact, these words, "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, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve" may have been a part of an early confession of faith that Christians committed to memory.

What do they mean? Simply stated they tell us that Jesus was a real human being who died on a cross for our sins, whose earthly remains were placed in a tomb, and who experienced a bodily resurrection from the grave. And furthermore, all of this took place in fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures. Wow!! So much for notions of a ghostly Jesus floating around on planet earth. As the Gospel writer Matthew declared, the arrival of Jesus was an incarnational event, Immanuel, "God with us!"

Indeed, it was an event prophesied throughout the Old Testament. Even a brief survey of the Old Testament includes passages of Scripture that speak very clearly about death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Here are a couple of excerpts:

- "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6).
- "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; and you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:9-11).

For the early Christians the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ was extremely important. In fact, it was so important that a special verb was used to describe his resurrection in this early confession of faith that Paul references in his letter to the Corinthians. That Christ died and was buried is expressed in the past tense. However, when verse four says that he was raised on the third day, it literally means that Christ not only experienced being raised from the dead as a past event, but that his resurrection also continues as a present reality. He is alive!

So what was Paul saying to the Corinthian church and what is he saying to us about the death, burial, and especially resurrection of Christ? I believe there are three things that we need to keep in mind.

First, Christ's death, burial, and resurrection was an historic event. It actually took place within the time and space of the world in which we live. Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross outside the city of Jerusalem, and his earthly human remains were buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. This is what the Scriptures tell us and there is evidence from the records of the Roman Empire to back this up. In 64 A.D., Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote about Emperor Nero's persecution of the Christians. He had blamed them for the fire that destroyed much of Rome and thousands of Christians were horribly executed, among them perhaps Peter and Paul. Describing these events, Tacitus writes, "And so, to get rid of the rumour (that the fire had been ordered perhaps by the emperor himself), Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius." As you can see, Tacitus was no friend of Christians. Nevertheless, he reported that the crucifixion of Christ was an historical event.

Second, Christ's death, burial, and resurrection was a verifiable event. That's what Paul is talking about when he lists all of those who were eyewitnesses, not necessarily to his death and burial, but most assuredly to his resurrection. Some of them, in fact, like Peter were absent during Christ's crucifixion, and only a few were probably present when Jesus was buried in the tomb. But a vast multitude saw and some of them even touched the person of the resurrected Lord. Paul lists them. First there is Peter, then the Twelve, a reference to the original twelve disciples that Jesus chose. Then there is James, the half brother of Jesus, the apostles, those who had known Jesus during his earthly ministry, and finally more than five hundred, all of whom saw Jesus at the same time. These five hundred may be those who were present when Christ ascended into heaven as recorded at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

Finally, Paul adds his name to the listing of those who had seen and experienced the presence of the resurrected Lord, but he does so in a most unusual way. He says that Christ appeared to him as one "abnormally born." This phrase in the Greek language of the New Testament can mean a number of things including a miscarriage, a premature birth, or an untimely birthing. Whatever Paul had in mind when he wrote these words, he is telling us that his encounter with Christ was different from what the other followers of Christ experienced when they met the resurrected Lord. They encountered him as a transformed individual who was both physical and spiritual in nature. He could appear and disappear in their presence, but he could also be as real as any of us sitting here this morning. On the other hand Paul met Jesus much later on the road to Damascus, long after he had ascended into heaven. His encounter with Christ was probably more like a vision than an actual meeting between two people who could reach out and shake hands with one another.

Third, the death, burial, and especially the resurrection of Christ is a pivotal event for Christianity. It is like the hub of a wagon wheel. Remove it from the center of the wheel and everything falls apart. Christianity becomes nothing more than set of moral guidelines presented by a man called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who pretended to be God. As author Hank Hanegraaff states in his book, *Resurrection*, "The resurrection is not merely important to the historic Christian faith. Without it there would be no Christianity. It is the singular doctrine that elevates Christianity above all other world religions."

That's precisely what Paul was saying to the Corinthians and that is what he is saying to us today. But there is something else that Paul is saying and it touches our lives directly and personally. In fact, you might say that it is the second great emphasis of the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Christ is the first one but not the last one who will be raised from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15: 20-22 Paul declares, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Do you hear what he is saying? There is hope. In Christ, death does not have the last word. It could not claim him and it will not claim us. For sure, each and every one of us will face the end of our physical existence. But in Christ our lives will not end in a grave. They will be transformed into the likeness of the resurrected Lord. Hear again what Paul said to the Christians in Philippi, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20-21).

Frances Jane Crosby, better known to most of us as Fanny, was blinded after six weeks of life. The doctor who was treating her applied a medication to her eyes that destroyed her sight. Nevertheless, she was a child prodigy. Growing up in a godly home she began memorizing five chapters of the Bible each week, and as a teenager could quote large portions of the Old and New Testaments. That knowledge plus a life of prayer served as the inspiration for her hymns. She attended the New York Institute for the Blind as a student and later became a teacher. She championed the needs of the blind, meeting with several presidents and speaking before Congress on numerous occasions. In addition, she gave herself to rescue mission work and lived in a small apartment in some of the most blighted neighborhoods of New York City. She composed nearly 9,000 hymns, sometimes writing 6 or 7 in a single day. In fact, she composed so many, like *Blessed Assurance*, *To God Be the Glory*, and *Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior*, that she sometimes had to write pseudonymously. Rarely, however, did she receive more than a dollar or two for each song she composed. And when she did receive more substantial sums of money for speaking engagements or song writing, she gave most of it away. On one occasion a well meaning pastor said to Fannie, "I think it is a pity that the Master did not give you sight when he showered so many other gifts upon you." In response, she

replied, "Do you know that if at birth I had been able to make one petition, it would have been that I was born blind? Because when I get to heaven, the first face that shall gladden my sight will be that of my Savior."

And, indeed, that is what each and every one of us can look forward to. Writing to the early Christians, the apostle John declared, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he (Jesus) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).