

Standing in the Good News

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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How can we stand when so much in life keeps trying to knock us down? Where do we stand so that our life matters? This chapter begins and ends with encouragement to stand in the gospel and to stand and give ourselves to the Lord.

Paul the apostle is writing to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul had started this church. He was the first to bring the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, to Corinth. Later he writes this letter to this church answering some of their questions and addressing some other issues.

One of those issues is the future resurrection of believers in Christ. In v. 12 Paul asks, "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" In other words, Paul's saying to them, "You believed in the resurrection of Christ. How can some of you now deny the future bodily resurrection of believers?" For some reason some of them have called into question the hope of resurrection for believers. They may have even begun to question Christ's resurrection. Thinking of themselves as "super-spiritual" Christians, they may have discounted the body's importance and felt that including the body in God's eternal purpose was distasteful. Paul challenges this notion and gives a reasoned defense of the hope of resurrection.

He starts by reminding them of what they already believe or have believed. One of his aims in all of his writing to the Corinthians is to call them back to Jesus, to get them centered on Jesus again. So he reminds them of the basics of Christian faith.

You may remember a story about Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. The team's training camp was getting started in the summer of 1961. The previous season had ended with a heartbreaking defeat when the Packers squandered a lead late in the fourth quarter and lost the NFL Championship to the Philadelphia Eagles.

The Green Bay players had been thinking about that loss for the entire off-season and now, finally, training camp had arrived and it was time

to get to work. The players were eager to advance their game to the next level and start working on details that would help them win a championship. But Coach Lombardi had a different idea.

Lombardi took nothing for granted. He started from scratch and assumed that the players carried over no knowledge from the year before. He stood in front of the team with a football in his hand and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football." Then he methodically covered the fundamentals all through training camp. Each player reviewed how to block and tackle. They started on page one of their playbooks. Max McGee, a Pro Bowl wide receiver, joked, "Uh, Coach, could you slow down a little? You're going too fast for us." Lombardi reportedly cracked a smile, but continued with his focus on the basics (<https://jamesclear.com/vince-lombardi-fundamentals>).

The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, and to us: "Church, this is the gospel." It's the good news I preached to you and you received. You stand in this good news. It's saving you and will save you if you hold onto it.

Paul says that he received this message and handed it on to them. That's the language of tradition. The summary of the good news Paul gives in verses 3-5 was already established teaching when he wrote this around A.D. 54. This is the way Christians talked about Jesus from the beginning.

And Paul ties his own story into this great story of God's. Paul received it and handed it on. Paul includes himself as one who saw the risen Lord Jesus. He experienced the grace of God that's shown and given in Jesus. We can tie our own story into God's good news story. In Jesus, God made our story his story, so that we can make God's story our story. We can find our place, we can stand in this good news.

What is this good news? It's 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 was seen by his followers.

Christ died for our sins. Jesus, the Messiah, died for us on account of our sins. That announcement isn't meant to induce shame. It's not intended to increase our guilt and make us feel worse: "It's my fault Jesus suffered and died." Now, we are the reason Jesus gave his life, but it's because he loves us. He couldn't stand to see us separated. He'd rather die than live

without you. We hear and we announce that Jesus died for us, died for our sins, as a declaration of God's love for us, as the cure for sin. Being convicted of our sin, knowing genuine guilt, and feeling godly sorrow is part of our response to realizing God loves us like that. But we're not meant to wallow in those feelings. They're more like the diagnosis of our disease that leads us to seek the cure.

Jesus was buried. This affirms that his death was real. He wasn't faking it. He took on a full human nature. He went through a whole range of human experiences, including dying.

Paul doesn't mention the empty tomb here. The tradition he's quoting doesn't mention it. But finding the tomb empty was important for Jesus' disciples. It's a major feature in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection. John's Gospel, written some forty years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, tells about it this way:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both of them were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. (20:1-10)

Though Jesus was dead and buried, *he was raised on the third day.* God raised him from the dead. This doesn't mean that his spirit just went to

heaven. Or that his spirit lives on. Or that he lived in the disciples' memories. It means Jesus stopped being dead and he started being alive again. It wasn't just a spiritual event. Jesus' resurrection was physical and literal. He did enter a new kind of life. His body was transformed and glorified. But his full humanity was transformed. He didn't leave anything of his humanity in the tomb.

It's not easy to come to life after you die. Did you hear last week about the man in Romania who'd been missing for years so his wife had him declared dead? He finally came back, but a court rejected his claim that he's alive! They said his appeal came too late and the ruling is final (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/world/europe/romania-dead-man.html>). How strange that a living person can't be legally declared alive.

The gospel, the good news that we stand in, tells us that Jesus is alive. There are people who don't believe that. But their objections don't make Jesus less alive anymore than that Romanian court's ruling makes Constantin Reliu less alive.

In another time and place, an angry Communist was quoted as saying, "I'll believe Jesus rose from the dead when the atheist leader of the Soviet Union becomes a Christian." Mikhail Gorbachev was the last leader of the Soviet Union. He's the one Ronald Reagan addressed, saying, "Tear down this wall!" In 2008, Gorbachev openly testified that he was a Christian. It was reported that he spent half an hour praying at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1582213/Mikhail-Gorbachev-admits-he-is-a-Christian.html>). There's no word on whether that one angry Communist believed when he heard about Gorbachev being a Christian. But if God could convert the Soviet leader, what can he do with us? What could he do with the "hard cases" we know?

Jesus died for our sins and was raised on the third day "*in accordance with the Scriptures.*" This refers to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. There's not a passage in the OT that specifically says the Messiah would die and be raised to life on the third day—although Isaiah 52-53 comes close. There are several verses that scholars identify as those the early church probably understood to refer to Jesus' death and resurrection. But Paul's likely speaking more about the grand sweep of

Scripture. Think of Scripture's big themes like Creation and New Creation; deliverance from slavery, exodus, the promised land; exile and restoration. Paul's referring to the overall purpose of God that's fulfilled in Jesus. It was important for the first Christians to see the story of Israel continued in Jesus the Messiah. We can be confident that God keeps promises and completes his purposes.

Paul adds another strand of tradition to the creed he's been quoting. After his resurrection, *Jesus was seen* by his followers. Paul mentions Peter (Cephas), the Twelve, a group of more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters, that is, followers of Jesus. At the time Paul wrote this, most of them were still alive and could tell about what they'd seen. Jesus appeared to his brother James, who later became leader of the Jerusalem church. He appeared to all the apostles—a group that includes more than the original twelve.

John's Gospel includes several appearances of the risen Jesus to his followers. Let's include one of those here:

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. (20:11-18)

Last of all, Paul says, Jesus appeared to me. Paul's story gets caught up in the story of Jesus and his followers. Paul experienced and lived the good news he's been talking about. And he's an example for us of experiencing and living the good news. It seemed Paul hadn't been in the right place at the right time. He remembers his life before he knew Jesus. "I don't even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted God's church." We probably never did that, but we know what it is to sin, to be alienated from God. But Paul received grace, God's favor, God's active and powerful love. "By the grace of God I am what I am." Not through anything Paul did to deserve it, but because God loved him and chose him, he became a Christian and an apostle. And God's grace to him wasn't in vain. Instead, it motivated him and empowered him to work hard at telling the good news. He says, "I worked, but it wasn't really me; it was grace in me." Grace isn't opposed to effort; it's opposed to earning.

Paul teaches in nearly all of his letters that we don't get right with God by working, but by grace. Then, having been put right with God and being made new, grace enables us to work. Filled with the power that raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:19-20), we can live and work and witness. By that power we stand in the good news. We stand when life tries to knock us down. We stand and our lives matter.

There are some interesting connections between this opening section and the last verse of this chapter: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58).

Paul calls these Christians brothers and sisters at the beginning and the end (verses 1, 50, 58).

He encourages them to stand firm (1, 2, 58).

He urges that they not believe in vain. He says God's grace to him was not in vain. He affirms that what we do in the Lord is not in vain (2, 10, 58).

This is the gospel: Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, he was seen. We can see him by faith. We can know him.

This chapter tells us that Christ is risen. Someone might wonder, so what? It goes on to say that in Christ we too will be raised. Again, so what? And it tells us that the resurrection of Jesus and our promised resurrection don't mean we sit and do nothing and just wait for heaven. The resurrection tells us that we can stand in the good news; we can stand and give ourselves fully to the Lord's work. We'll find that our faith and work in the Lord are not in vain because the power of grace energizes us as we believe and do God's will.