

## WHERE WE ARE HEADED

We are skipping ahead in our study of First Corinthians, moving to chapter fifteen to talk about the resurrection in that we have just celebrated Easter. After a few weeks in chapter fifteen, we will turn back to where we left off and pick up with chapters twelve through fourteen. Seeing as Paul wrote this letter with specific topical "chunks," we don't disrupt the study of the text too much by picking up the resurrection topic out of "order."

In this chapter Paul will, ultimately, explain the massive significance of Jesus' resurrection. Apparently some in Corinth had begun to treat the fact of the resurrection as of little real value. It may not be that they denied it outright, it is just that the way they thought about what it meant to be "spiritual" left the idea of the resurrection of the dead as a kind of non-essential idea.

In this first section of chapter fifteen, Paul is going to begin by reminding his readers of the essential building blocks of the Gospel message—the things that Paul feels are of "first importance." And we will have to ask ourselves whether we are living as if these things of "first importance" really do matter to us.

## WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

As you will notice as you read this section, Paul places a fair amount of emphasis on the "witness" who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection. We will have to wrestle with the significance of that and why Paul stresses that, but *that* he focused on witnesses is what prompts the opening question. We want your people to think about how truth can ultimately be assessed by witnesses, even if the truth seeker is himself or herself not a genuine personal eye witness to the event. Truth can be learned through the testimony of another.

When you turn to the text, you can alert your people that you are only going to be dipping your toes (proverbially speaking!) into a long chapter with some huge implications for us. In this first discussion, we are only getting Paul's background thinking for what he will address in the rest of the chapter. That is not to say that what he writes about in the first eleven verses are less significant; only that the *implications* and *application* of what he writes comes out only as we work through the rest of the chapter.

The letter to the Corinthians is a collection of responses to things that Paul either heard about or heard from the Corinthians about. And in chapter fifteen he is picking up a fresh topic. It is unclear how this particular issue (about resurrection) came to his attention, but he is starting a new subject in the flow of the book.

He begins (1:1-2) by affirming his understanding of the foundational "good news" of the Christian life. The message of the Gospel that he preached to them is the word that they had received, the word that provided the spiritual ground on which they currently stood, and that served as the basis for their "salvation" (their new life with God).

When referring to "if" they hold fast, Paul is not questioning their salvation; his use of "if" in this context is closer to "seeing as" than it is to a genuine question about the certainty of their faith. This is also the case when writing "unless you believed in vain" (1:2). He is not raising a question about the genuineness of their faith but only saying that if someone wasn't believing this message of this Gospel he or she would be believing "uselessly."

What is the Gospel that Paul says is this true foundation? He highlights four things that are of "first importance."

*That Christ died for our sins.* This short phrase sums up a huge theological idea. Jesus Christ's death was not the death of a martyr or merely an example of heroic love. To write that His death was *for* our sins implies that He died as a substitute, in the place of those who sinned.

*That He was buried.* This affirmation substantiates and undergirds the first. Jesus' death was no mere swoon, nothing short of actual, physical death. And it was a corpse that was laid in the tomb. His death was real.

*That he was raised on the third day.* Here Paul underscores the resurrection. What Jesus was "all about" didn't end with His death and burial. The good news must include the proclamation of His resurrection.

*That he was seen by many.* Paul mentions a large number of witnesses who visibly and genuinely saw the risen Lord. Here Paul is affirming that Jesus' resurrection was no mere "vision" or hallucination; Jesus was not alive "in the minds and hearts of His followers." To affirm so clearly the evidence of multiple witnesses is to underscore the physical, bodily, real re-animation of the corpse. (And later in this chapter, Paul is going to build on that idea to argue for the significance of the resurrection for all believers as well.)

In highlighting all of this, Paul does two other things. He insists that all of this is "in accordance with the Scriptures." That is, what he is preaching flows out of what God has revealed and declared in His Word. It is not that there is a proof text here or there to anchor these key ideas to, but that the death, burial, resurrection, and witness of Jesus is part and parcel of what God has revealed He is doing in the earth.

Paul also mentions himself, displaying his own humble view of his call as an apostle. His language is not merely self-deprecating; he simply is admitting how he sees his own call into apostleship. But the point is not to denigrate himself, but to underscore the idea that he is what he is *only by the grace of God that reached him through this same Gospel*. And he then drives home the point that whether through him or through another, there is only one Gospel, one true message that serves as the foundation for our lives (15:11).

Paul is anchoring our thinking in *reality*. This Christian life is not "a way of thinking about life" as much as it is "a way that life has been altered by what God did through Jesus." And, if we come to grips with that, it has the power to change our lives.

We will be looking at 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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### INITIAL THOUGHTS

You've been in a car accident. You are not sure exactly what happened or how it happened. As you get out of your car and turn to face the other driver, you notice other cars have stopped and some people on the sidewalk are milling around, watching. How would you go about getting clarity on what actually happened?

### REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

Although it may be in vogue these days in some circles to deny the possibility of knowing "truth," when it comes to balancing a check book, agreeing to a new home loan, or determining how to sort out a car accident, we all live with a sense that there are some things that are true. And that is at the heart of Paul's thoughts in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians.

What does Paul tell us he is doing as he opens this chapter?

What are the components that go into the Gospel that Paul preached to the Corinthians?

Why would Paul stress that this message was "in accordance with the Scriptures?"

What would be the value of citing numerous witnesses who saw Jesus alive?

What value is it to know of Paul's own personal experience with the risen Jesus? How does that add to his argument?

How do verses 15:1-2 and 15:11 serve as a "bracket" that frames the point Paul is intending to make?

### BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

What difference does it make to the way you approach life to think that what Paul writes about in this section is *verifiable truth* as opposed to *good ideas*?

In what way(s) is your own life defined by the truth that Paul lays out in these verses?

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