

The Gospel That Saves You

1st Corinthians 15:1-11

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Welcome to the third Sunday of Lent—that great 40 days of power when Christians traditionally renew their faith through the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. We want to walk closer with Jesus. We want to experience his glorious freedom. We want to get back to the basics of being filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. Our recipe is simple: give, pray and fast. And it is working! One of you shared with me your vow to fast from pop and you have already lost 11 pounds. To God be the glory!

Today we continue our series on Basic Christianity, a study of the Apostles' Creed. We are at the very center of the creed: the deeds of Jesus Christ. Out of all the world's great teachers, from Socrates and Aristotle to Buddha and Mohammed, Jesus Christ is the only one who is remembered not for his life and teachings but for the way he died. Without the Cross there would be no Christianity. The key to understanding Jesus is in his death. That is why the gospels spend so much time and ink detailing the last day of his life. In the ancient world as well as today there were lots of false teachers trying to downplay the cross or even eliminate it altogether. Some preachers avoid it. Some churches have removed the cross from their sanctuaries. But do not be fooled: this is not Christianity, it is just psycho-babble and empty philosophy.

Let's begin with the words *Jesus suffered*. After he was arrested, Jesus was bound and kept up all night. He was denied food and water. He was beaten by his captors twice—once by the temple guards and again by Roman soldiers. This is one reason why Christians do not believe in torturing prisoners. In his weakened condition, Jesus was then lashed repeatedly by a whip containing sharp pieces of metal and bone. Finally, he was nailed to a cross through his wrists and feet. He hung there for three hours before he died. From now on, no one can say, "God does not understand my suffering." No one can say, "God has forsaken me in my suffering," because Jesus has been there. The Qur'an (or Koran, i.e. the Islamic holy book) says explicitly that Jesus did not suffer death on the cross. The boundary between Islam and Christianity is the Cross—the suffering of Jesus Christ.

It happened under Pontius Pilate. How did this guy wind up in the Apostles' Creed? He was the judge of the highest court on earth at the time. You see, the Father deliberately and carefully

chose the circumstances of Jesus' death. He could have allowed the crowd in Nazareth to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). He could have let the crowd stone him in Jerusalem (John 8:59), but he did not. He chose a judicial death because this would make clear for us the meaning of it all.

Pilate declared Jesus innocent when he said, "I find no crime in this man." (John 19:6) The human race was revealed as guilty when the crowd shouted, "Let his blood be on us and our children." (Matthew 27:25) The Bible says the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23) But through the Cross, the innocent is declared guilty and dies the death of the guilty, so that the guilty can be declared righteous and set free to live. It is a legal substitution of the innocent for the guilty.

Without the Cross, no one is freed from the consequences of sin. God demonstrates his holiness by absorbing our rightful punishment into himself as Jesus Christ. God demonstrates his mercy by declaring pardon and righteousness to anyone who receives and believes in Christ. The situation we are now in is like prisoners in a jail who have just been told that all the doors have been unlocked and everyone is free. But only those who really believe the word get up and claim their liberty. Have you done this yet?

Jesus descended to the dead. In some translations of the Apostles' Creed it reads that he descended into hell. What does this mean? First of all, it means that the sovereignty of Jesus is complete—even the gates of hell must open for him, even the devil must bow to him. Secondly, Peter tells us that Jesus preached to the spirits in prison since the days of Noah (1st Peter 3:18 & 4:6) so that the gospel might be made known and available to every generation.

The resurrection of Christ does not erase the pain and suffering of Jesus but serves to validate his death as the great victory of God over sin and death. Paul gives us two lines of testimony to the resurrection. (1st Corinthians 15:3-8) One is the prophecies of the Old Testament, such as Psalm 16:10-11 when Christ speaks through David and says, "You will not abandon me to the grave...you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures..."

The second is eyewitnesses. Paul gives us an impressive list of about 600 witnesses. First are Peter and the twelve hand-picked by Jesus: Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot (excepting Judas Iscariot, who died before the resurrection). Then a crowd of more than 500; then James, the half-brother of Jesus; then the apostles--which probably refers to the group of 72 that Jesus sent out two by two in Luke 10:1. Finally, Paul adds himself. All told that is at least 585 but probably more like 600. If you gave each witness ten minutes to talk and spent eight hours a day listening

to them, it would take the better part of two weeks to hear it all. It still takes an act of trust on our part to believe in Jesus Christ, but the historical evidence for the resurrection is better than it is for any other event of the first century.

Where is the body of Jesus now? He has ascended into heaven and he is physically present in the spiritual realm. His Holy Spirit remains with us on earth, but his body is in heaven. The right hand is the place of highest honor. From there he is watching, guiding and supervising the mission of the church. In these days of downsizing and outsourcing, it is worth noting that our management structure has not changed in 2000 years!

Jesus will come again. Our faith points to the future. It is not a future we are going to build, but one that God has promised to bring to us. When Christ comes, he will judge the earth. The Bible says he is going to start with the church. Get ready! A friend of mine had a t-shirt that read, “Look busy—Jesus is coming.”

The Bible says in 1st Thessalonians 1:8-9, “...those who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus...will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” You know, if everyone went to heaven, it would be a *helluva* place. If you did not want to walk with Jesus in this life, God will not make you do it in the next—that is the punishment. G.K. Chesterton once said that hell is God’s monument to human freedom. We are truly free to turn away from salvation in Jesus Christ for eternity. This will be made clear on judgment day.

For me it is a humbling and encouraging thought to know that I will be judged. It reminds me that my choices matter, and everything I do and say has value and significance. I know Jesus wants me to better myself. He judges my performance as a coach with an eye to seeing me improve. He is not against me but for me. The question for us to ask is whether we see Jesus as our friend or as an opposing stranger who arbitrarily accosts us at the end of the age. For my part, I would recommend you make friends with Jesus Christ now while you are still on the way.