

Iglesia de Carne

Studies in First Corinthians

Text

First Corinthians 15:1-11

Topic

The apostle Paul describes how God's grace launched him into a life of laboring for the Gospel

Title

"Love's Labor's Launched"

Two-hundred seventy-two words. Ten sentences. Three minutes to deliver. Regarded by a majority as the greatest speech in American history.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It was delivered at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863.

The president wasn't the featured speaker at the dedication. Any of you history buffs know who was? Edward Everett, former representative, senator, and governor of Massachusetts, delivered the keynote address.

Everett's talk lasted a full two-hours. Lincoln could say a lot in just a few words.

He is outdone by the apostle Paul. Using just a few words the apostle totally and completely presents the Gospel - the Good News of God's salvation

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offered to mankind. You find the words in verses three and four of First Corinthians fifteen.

Think of it: **The power to save a person for eternity can be delivered in about ten seconds.**

It is my prayer we will marvel at the profound simplicity of the Gospel today as we work through this concise text. I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 You're To Express The Simplicity Of The Gospel,** and **#2 You're To Experience The Stimulation Of The Gospel.**

#1 - You're To Express The Simplicity Of The Gospel (v1-4)

It's always a good idea to try to understand why something was written in the first place. It keeps us from misreading the text or from reading into it our own biases.

The believers in Corinth had received the Gospel. They were saved. But some of them had embraced an incorrect view of the future resurrection of believers from the dead. Look at verse twelve for a moment:

1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

They believed, that "Christ... has been raised from the dead." But they were now saying that "there is no resurrection of the dead" for believers in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote these verses to show them the logical inconsistency, and the spiritual absurdity, of their claim. Since Jesus has risen, *so must His followers.*

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Knowing the context will help us get through a very difficult verse two right here at the beginning of the chapter.

1 Corinthians 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

Paul had brought the Gospel to the city of Corinth. The ten second Gospel message, augmented by his teaching weekly in the synagogue, was the power of God unto salvation. Many had "received" and had a new "stand[ing]" in Jesus. God had justified them. They were saved.

Or were they? The next verse sounds troubling at first:

1 Corinthians 15:2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you - unless you believed in vain.

Does Paul mean to say that salvation is a matter of my ability to "hold fast that word?" Some would say, "Yes," but I don't think that is what he meant here. He was not addressing the perseverance of the saints but, rather, the logical conclusion of their incorrect teaching about the future resurrection of believers.

It was commonly taught by the Greek intellectuals that a person's soul, the immaterial part of him, was immortal, but that the body, the material part of him, was not. The Greeks rejected any thought of a *physical* resurrection of the body.

The believers in Corinth had begun to adopt the Greek philosophy that there was no future physical resurrection of the body. It was something they had allowed to creep in to the church from the world.

They were wrong:

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- In verses twelve through nineteen Paul will argue that if the dead are not raised then neither was Jesus raised.
- Then, in verses twenty through twenty-eight he will argue that since Jesus has been raised, so will we.

Here, then, is what I think Paul was saying in verse two to the saints in Corinth. If you do not “hold fast that word which I preached to you” - that is, if you reject the future physical resurrection from the dead - then it logically follows that Jesus did not rise from the dead and therefore believing in Him is in vain.

If this idea about there being no future resurrection was correct, it reduced the Gospel to a lie that cannot save anyone. It was logically inconsistent and spiritually absurd.

This is a good example of why we need to read the verses preceding and following any Bible verse. Out of context, verse two makes it sound like we keep ourselves saved by persevering. But as I pointed out, Paul was not talking about perseverance, not at all.

Speaking of the Gospel, what is it? Here it comes, in some of the most beautifully concise language you will ever encounter.

1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

“First of all” means first in priority. Whatever else Paul taught from the Scriptures week-by-week and day-by-day, it was to expound upon the simplicity of the Gospel.

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"Christ died for our sins." "Christ" connects the historical person, Jesus, with all the many prophecies and promises in the Old Testament that God would send Israel the Anointed One - the Christ - their Messiah and the worlds Savior.

The fact "Christ died for our sins" presupposes a separation between God and man whose penalty was death. It lets us know that the problem with the world is sin.

"For our sins" tells you that Jesus Christ died as a Substitute, taking your place, to satisfy the penalty for sins.

"According to the Scriptures" reminds you that everything God has said in His Word was leading up to the death of Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. Beginning very early in Genesis and continuing all through the Old Testament you have the story of the Messiah and Savior being sent into the world while, in the mean time, lambs were offered as a temporary substitute for your sins. Then, one glorious moment in human history, Jesus stepped forward, the prophesied and promised Christ, and was declared by John the Baptist "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world."

"He was buried" verifies that Jesus Christ was a real man in a real physical body. He died on the Cross and was "buried" as a corpse in the tomb.

"He rose again" in a real, physical body - a glorified body fit for eternity. He has been raised and lives forever.

"The third day" establishes that we are talking about the historic events that occurred in Jerusalem in the first century.

Again Paul said it was "according to the Scriptures." The phrase modifies the fact that Jesus Christ was "raised." It reminds us of the passages in the Old Testament, like Psalm twenty-two and Psalm sixteen and Psalm one hundred

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and ten, where the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah and Savior were prophesied and promised.

That's it in the proverbial nutshell. " [Jesus] Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and... He was buried, and... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

What I just delivered was 25 words. It can be recited in under 10 seconds. You can say more - a lot more - but it's all prefigured in this masterful declaration of the Gospel.

Paul said he "delivered" what he had "received." That word "received" is another word that summarizes so much. It tells us that the Gospel comes to us as a gift, by God's grace. It cannot be discerned by human reason. It cannot be earned by human works. It is God's free gift; it is all of grace. It is to be "received" by faith as you believe.

But it must be "delivered." It reminds me of a telegram. Telegrams are short, concise messages that say something incredibly important. The person who delivers a telegram adds nothing to it; they only deliver it faithfully. Paul had received the Gospel and he delivered it. We receive it and then are to deliver it.

We have a tendency to want to explain the Gospel. For sure, we love the branch of theology called Apologetics.

It comes from the Greek word *apologia*, a legal term meaning "defense." It is the branch of Christian theology concerned with the intelligent presentation and defense of the historical Christian faith.

The Gospel itself is first something to deliver, not explain. It **is** wonderfully explainable. But we are to deliver it so it can be received.

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In other words, be more like Abraham Lincoln than like Edward Everett.

Deliver what you received. Let the power reside in the Word of God and not your explanations. Say more if there is an open door or an ongoing dialog. It's simply profound.

Pastor Chuck Smith often encouraged pastors to, "Simply preach the Word simply." What we are saying today is to "Simply deliver the Gospel simply."

#2 - You're To Experience The Stimulation Of The Gospel (v5-11)

What would you guess is the most widely consumed psychoactive drug? It's caffeine.

Caffeine is a psychoactive central nervous system stimulant. People talk about being buzzed, wired, or getting their caffeine fix. Coffee is called go juice; liquid energy; morning jolt; jitter juice.

A person might drink a strong cup of coffee, or a caffeine-loaded energy drink, to either sober up or to stay awake. It's interesting that the Bible sometimes describes believers as needing to awaken from a spiritual lethargy. Or to sober up in these Last Days.

Our stimulant is the Gospel that saved and transforms us. The next few verses show the transformation the Gospel accomplishes, stimulating serving.

1 Corinthians 15:5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 15:7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.

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We know “Cephas” better as the apostle Peter. If ever a man was transformed by the Gospel, it was Peter:

- See him trembling at the fire, afraid of the testimony of a servant girl. Then see him bold to proclaim the Gospel to a scoffing crowd of many thousands on the Day of Pentecost.
- See him flee from His Savior’s crucifixion only to ask later in life, according to church history, to be himself crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die in the same manner as His Lord and Master.

“The twelve” was the designation given by the early church to the original eleven disciples of Jesus and Matthias, who was properly chosen by lot to replace Judas. These misfits went on to turn the world upside down proclaiming the Gospel. They were best described as “ignorant [unlearned] men” who had been with Jesus.

We don’t know when or where “five hundred brethren” saw the risen Jesus Christ “at once.”

But again we would emphasize the radical transformation of the Gospel. After we are saved, we become part of a supernatural family, that is often stronger than our natural family. There is an incredible, supernatural union that takes place between those who receive the Gospel and believe.

Notice Paul’s passing mention that some of them had “fallen asleep.” Maybe he was anticipating an argument from those who denied the resurrection that believers were dying with no sign of being raised.

Sure, they had died, but it was more like being “asleep” because their spirits, conscious in Heaven, would be reunited with their resting bodies at the resurrection and rapture of the church.

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Always bear in mind that these first century believers had few biblical resources. The Old Testament was not silent with regard to the physical resurrection, but it was hushed. It didn't give much information.

As far as the New Testament, we have all twenty-seven books. According to one timeline I found, the only books (letters) written prior to First Corinthians were James, First and Second Thessalonians, and Galatians. It doesn't mean they had any exposure to these letters. It does mean that most of what we call the New Testament was unavailable to them.

Believers today remain confused about the resurrection; how much more so the Corinthians. Add to that the lure of Greek philosophy, and you have a recipe for false teaching.

Jesus "was seen by James." This "James" was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. What is remarkable is that James and Jude and the others siblings of Jesus, who grew up with Him, did not believe in Him until after the resurrection. But then - what a transformation. James rose to a position of leadership in the Jerusalem church and wrote a letter that challenges believers to this day to walk in a manner worthy of Jesus.

"By all the apostles" tells us that there were others who were considered "apostles" in the first century.

Those guys went around establishing churches. They were stimulated to serve.

1 Corinthians 15:8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

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The number one persecutor of Christians, Paul was transformed on the road to Damascus by an encounter with the risen Lord.

He refers to it as being “born out of due time.” His was an untimely birth. By this it seems Paul meant that he came later, that he lacked the advantages of the believers he just mentioned; yet God could, and did, call him into serving Him.

1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

He came after the others, but his untimely birth was not a hindrance to his zeal.

“Grace,” “grace,” “grace.” It was all the gift of God. Yet grace stimulated a response from Paul - he “labored more abundantly than” all the rest.

Clearly he was not boasting. It was a known fact that Paul out-worked others. He took no credit.

1 Corinthians 15:11 Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

The messenger is insignificant. Peter, James, the twelve, the other apostles, the five hundred - **all** had received the same Gospel and all delivered it to others.

The Gospel stimulated Paul, and these others he mentioned, to “labor more abundantly.” It can sound like a contradiction. If it’s all of grace, how can you talk about how much you’re doing for God?

It was no contradiction for Paul. Grace was so real to him that it propelled him, redirecting all of his natural energies towards serving Jesus.

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We are definitely *not* talking about doing works of righteousness by which we consider ourselves more spiritual than others. We're not talking about lists of "do's" and "don'ts" that set us apart from others and make us appear more spiritual.

We *are* talking about the bent, the passion, of our heart. I "labor more abundantly" for Jesus because of what He has done and is continuing to do in me.

That's why we try to talk to believers more about what God has done and is doing for them than what they ought to be doing for God.

Here is another way of looking at it. Does my understanding of grace make me lazy? Am I cruising through life, taking advantage of God's abundance while giving Him my pittance? If so, I do not understand His grace at all.

Bottom line: Because of His grace I should always be doing more for God, not less, until He calls me home. I don't do it out of *duty* but from *devotion*.

Paul could honestly say, "I labor more abundantly." Do I labor "more" abundantly? Or "less" abundantly?

If your answer is "less," don't just do more. Don't start there. You'll only get discouraged.

Draw closer to the Lord. Enter in to a deeper understanding of His grace in your life.

Think hard upon the Gospel which was delivered to you, and which you received.



Be stimulated by what Jesus has done for you.

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