

## XXIX. Just the Gospel Facts, Ma'am

March 4/6, 2014

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

**Aim:** To believe the gospel that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures.

We assume from what Paul says here that a good number of the Corinthians were in the grip of skepticism about the resurrection. They seem to have accepted the fact that Jesus Himself had risen from the dead, but they refused to accept His resurrection as the guarantee of their own.

Reports from Corinth had come to Paul in Ephesus that some in Corinth were denying the future resurrection of the body (15:12). As a result others in the church were being 'led astray' (15:33), 'shaken' in their faith, 'moved' from their firm seat as Christians (15:58). This unbelief by some of the members was 'corrupting' the whole body (15:33-34).

At Corinth, the matter of the resurrection of the body was apparently more controversial than the numerous questions addressed already, which may explain why the apostle reserves his discussion until nearly the end of the letter. It seems that the problem was although all within the church must have accepted that Jesus had been raised, there were some who entertained the strange notion that it was impossible for the bodies of the Christian dead to come alive again (15:12). The central issue was that they were attacking apostolic teaching – and hence Paul himself – and were dragging others in their train.

How are we to explain such a shocking thing? Perhaps the skeptics were simply reflecting the common Greek viewpoint of the day. The Greeks believed the body was inherently evil and that it was the prison-house of the soul. When death came, the soul was finally released from its prison. The idea of the body being raised at some later time and reunited with the soul was, to this way of thinking, the most undesirable thing imaginable.

Paul has addressed a sequence of serious current difficulties in Corinth through the pages of this epistle, but none so critical as this. He has kept the most potentially dangerous matter to the end so that his words will have the greatest impact on the assembly as they sit listening to his letter being read to them.

It was obvious to the apostle, and probably to his opponents, that the twin doctrines of the resurrection *from* the dead – in the case of Jesus – and *of* the dead – in the case of all believers, are inseparably linked. For the apostle, one task had become all-important: that the good news of the risen Savior and its consequences be restated and applied. This is the burden of chapter 15, and in these 58 verses Paul gives the most extensive treatment of the resurrection in all of Scripture. As Paul begins his lengthy sermon on the resurrection, his first emphasis is to demonstrate that Christ's resurrection had definitely been preached among them (15:1-11).

The doctrinal problem on which this chapter focuses was not the Corinthians' disbelief in Christ's resurrection but confusion about their own. Paul was not trying to convince them that Christ rose from the dead but that one day they, too, would be raised with Him to eternal life. Nevertheless, to lay the foundation, in the first 11 verses he reviews the evidences for Jesus' resurrection, a truth he acknowledges they already believed (vv. 1, 11).

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### A. The Gospel That Paul Preached (1 Corinthians 15:1-7)

#### 1. The Gospel Impact (15:1-2)

##### a) *The Gospel Preached (15:1a)*

<sup>1</sup>*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...*

By addressing them again as ‘brethren’ (cp. 1:10; 2:1; 3:1; 10:1; etc.), Paul assures those to whom he writes that he recognizes them to be fellow Christians.

Paul introduces his teaching on the resurrection of the dead with the words, ‘I *remind* you, brothers...’ This is not new material but a reminder of what they already knew. By contrast, the opening words of the previous sermon (12:1, on tongues), ‘I would not have you *uniformed*,’ signaled the introduction of teaching that was new to them. But this was not the case here.

The apostle knew that his message had brought nothing but good, as he makes plain by the repetition of ‘gospel’ both as noun and verb (‘evangelized,’ ‘preached’). ‘Gospel’ (*euaggelion*) means ‘good message,’ this part of the verse reading almost literally: ‘the good message with which I good-messaged you.’ The resurrection is good news, and without it all is gloom.

##### b) *The Gospel Received (15:1b-2)*

*...which you received, in which you stand,<sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

This ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*) which Paul ‘handed over’ and which they ‘received’ is very important. That church – and every other church – ‘stands *in* it,’ that is, exists *by means of* it. They gospel is the very means of a church’s existence. It may have a noticeboard bearing the word ‘church,’ but unless that assembly is founded on the gospel it is a church in name only. Furthermore, it is this gospel ‘through which’ the church and its members ‘are *being* saved.’ The present tense tells us that salvation is a continuing process as well as an accomplished fact (cp. ‘you *have been* saved’ – Eph. 2:8).

Not only have the Corinthians received this truth, they must now ‘stand’ in it. The announcement that Jesus rose from the dead has become the foundation of their lives. Christ lives for them and they, ostensibly, for Him. It is through this gospel that the Corinthians ‘are being saved,’ which means that they are being borne along by a rescue process, the tense being present continuous. Elsewhere, Paul insists that believers are in principle already saved and also that their final salvation lies in the future (cp. Eph. 2:5, 8; Rom. 5:9, 10; 8:24). Rescue is a matter of yesterday, today, tomorrow, and eternity.

The point of the first two verses is that the Corinthian believers were themselves living evidence that this doctrine was true. The fact that they came out of spiritual blindness and deadness of Judaism or paganism and into the light and life of Christ testified to the power of the gospel, and therefore to the power of the resurrection. It also testified that they already believed in the truth of Christ’s resurrection. It was the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that Paul had preached to them, that they had ‘received,’ and in which he assures them they now ‘stand’ and by which they ‘are saved,’ delivered from sins power and condemnation. Because of the reality of Christ’s resurrection and of their trust in it, they were now a part of His church and thereby were evidence of the power of that resurrection.

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Here, however, Paul sounds a pastoral note. His words, ‘If you are *holding fast* to it, unless you believed *in vain*’ are really a probing exhortation. Clearly Paul is urging them to *continue* to hold tenaciously and purposefully to the gospel.

Paul’s qualifying phrase – ‘if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain’ – does not teach that true believers are in danger of losing their salvation, but it is a warning against non-saving faith. So a clearer rendering would be, ‘...if you hold fast what I preached to you, unless your faith is worthless or unless you believed without effect.’ The Corinthians’ holding fast to what Paul had preached (see 11:2) was the result of and an evidence of their genuine salvation, just as their salvation and new life were an evidence of the power of Christ’s resurrection. It must be recognized, however, that some lacked the true saving faith, and thus did not continue to obey the Word of God.

A professing Christian who holds to orthodox doctrine and living and then fully rejects it proves that his salvation was never real. He is able to let go of the things of God because he is doing the holding. He does not belong to God and therefore God’s power cannot keep him. Such a person does not ‘hold fast the word’ because his faith is ‘in vain.’ It was never real. He cannot hold fast because he is not held fast.

The gospel is the message that must be believed before anyone can become a Christian. The proof that someone really believes it is that he continues to hold fast to it. Continuance is the mark of reality! If there is no present holding fast, it is because there was never a laying hold of the gospel message with a true and living faith!

### 2. The Gospel Facts (15:3-7)

#### a) *The Gospel Delivered (15:3a)*

<sup>3</sup>*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:*

‘Of first importance’ (*en prōtois*) signifies ‘principal things’ rather than implying a ministry that would have been in some sense chronological first.

When Paul says ‘I delivered to you,’ he means he *brought* authoritative teaching, not something of his own origination. He did not design it, he only ‘delivered’ what God had authored. As in 11:23 and Galatians 1:11-12, Paul insists that he did not contrive his message and that he had never done more than relay what he received directly from the Lord.

#### b) *The Gospel Contents (15:3b-7)*

In discussing the resurrection as an indispensable part of the gospel, Paul takes the Corinthians back to the fundamental question of what it means to become a Christian. The Christian is the one who has heard and believed a definite message. He or she subscribes wholeheartedly to a certain body of truth. Paul describes that truth here.

#### (1) Christ Died for Our Sins (15:3b)

*...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...*

The first part of the gospel message is that ‘Christ died for our sins.’ To die ‘for’ sins means that Christ surrendered His life for the benefit of others.

Here ‘Christ’ is Jesus’ title, the Greek form of the Hebrew ‘Messiah.’ The coming of the Messiah/Christ was a great hope of the Old Testament, focused on a new David, his ‘son’ who

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will reign from his throne forever, the Lord's 'anointed,' called 'Immanuel.' The New Testament throbs with *Christology*, the conviction that Jesus was the One 'anointed of the Lord,' 'His Christ.' The death of Jesus 'for our sins' fulfills another hope of the Old Testament, the advent of the Servant of the Lord who was to die 'for' the sins of others (Is. 53:8; cp. Is. 11:2; 42:1). Thus, the coming of a Spirit-anointed 'David' and the suffering for the sins of others of the Spirit-anointed Servant are both 'according to the Scriptures.' These great and central promises of the Old Testament converge on the Christ who died for our sins.

### (2) Christ Was Buried (15:4a)

<sup>4</sup>...*that he was buried...*

The next part of the gospel message is that 'Christ was buried.' The burial of Christ seems at first glance to be an almost insignificant and trivial detail. But the burial is an essential emphasis because it confirms the reality of both His death and resurrection. If Jesus was buried, He really died and there was a tomb that could actually be investigated to see if He arose!

The burial of Jesus is important. First, it must be regarded as historical fact. Each gospel refers to the burial of Jesus (Mt. 27:57-61; Mk. 15:42-47; Lk. 23:50-56; Jn. 19:38-42). The circumstances of the burial are consistent with Jewish customs. Jesus was buried in the tomb of an eminent man. The urgent task of burying Jesus before the Sabbath fell to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Council and secret follower of Jesus, the disciples having fled. Jesus' burial was not in a grave or hole in the ground, however, but in a vault hewn from the rock face, whose mouth was sealed with a large rolling stone. Jesus was not buried in a grave but entombed in a tomb. The witnesses of His entombment in Joseph's vault were identifiable (Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James the Less), one of whom was the wife of a high official (Joanna, wife of Chusa, the head steward of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee). Thus the burial of Jesus in a tomb of an eminent member of the Sanhedrin as witnessed by identifiable persons, one of whom was prominent, are details that were readily verifiable. This is not the stuff of legend and myth but of history.

Second, the burial of Christ as a fact of history is connected to another such fact, that the tomb was empty. The tradition Paul quotes implies that the tomb was empty. Since Christ died *and* was buried *and* was raised *and* appeared to many witnesses, how could the tomb not have been empty?

Third, the burial of Jesus underscores the fact that he had, indeed, truly died. The historic three-day interval between death and resurrection demonstrates that Jesus was not taken down unconscious from the cross: He actually expired and was then buried. An interval of less than three days would have led to the suspicion that Jesus swooned, soon to be revived. Paul's words are emphatic: 'Christ died.' It is as he anticipated that men would teach otherwise, as has often been the case\*. Furthermore, had Jesus remained in the tomb for a longer period, His body must have suffered visible corruption (cp. Jn. 11:39). God did not permit this to happen (cp. Ps. 16:10). In short, the three-day interval was exactly right: in principle as well as in detail, the Old Testament anticipated apostolic preaching.

\*For example, here is an English translation of the Qur'an 4:158-159, with 'commentary':

[4:158] And their saying, 'We did kill the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah;' whereas they slew him not, nor crucified him, but he was made to appear to them like *one crucified*; and those who differ therein are certainly in *a state of* doubt about it;

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they have no *definite* knowledge thereof, but only follow a conjecture; and they did not convert this *conjecture* into a certainty;

[4:159] On the contrary, Allah exalted him to Himself. And Allah is Mighty, Wise.

Mufradāt). That Jesus did not die on the cross but died a natural death is clear from the Qurʾān. The following facts, as narrated in the Gospels themselves lend powerful support to the Quranic version:—

1. Being a Divine Prophet Jesus could not have died on the cross because according to the Bible “he that is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut. 21:23).
2. He had prayed to God in great agony to “take away this cup (of death on the cross) from me” (Mark, 14:36; Matt. 26:29; Luke, 22:42); and his prayer was heard (Heb. 5:7).
3. He had predicted that like Jonah who had gone into the belly of the whale alive and had come out of it alive (Matt. 12:40) he would remain in an excavated sepulchre for three days and would come out of it alive.
4. He had also prophesied that he would go to seek out the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel (John, 10:16). Even Jews in Jesus’s time believed that the Lost Tribes of Israel had become dispersed in different lands (John, 7:34, 35).
5. Jesus had remained hung on the cross only for about three hours (John, 19:14) and being a person of normal constitution he could not have died in such a short time.
6. Immediately after he had been taken down from the cross his side was pierced and blood and water flowed out of it which was a certain sign of life (John, 19:34).
7. The Jews themselves were not sure of Jesus’s death because they had asked Pilate to have a guard posted at his sepulchre “lest his disciples come by night and steal him away and say unto the people, ‘He is risen from the dead’” (Matt. 27:64).

### (3) Christ Was Raised on the Third Day (15:4b)

*...that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...*

That brings us, of course to the resurrection itself. The body that died and was buried came out of the grave! Many have abandoned the idea of a bodily resurrection in favor of a spiritual resurrection. They believe Jesus’ spirit continued to live and the disciples, feeling this spirit, constructed the resurrection stories. But it is obvious that Paul had no such thing in mind. It was Jesus’ body that was crucified. It was Jesus’ body that was buried. And it stands to reason, therefore, that it was the body of Jesus that was brought out of the grave.

Christ died by His own volition, but He was ‘raised’ *by God*. God did not allow death to hold Him but in vindication of the promised Messiah raised Him alive as Lord for the duration of history before the End, and beyond the End forever. This is the greatest miracle of God since the creation of the world.

The tradition Paul quotes does not say, ‘He was raised three days later,’ that is, seventy-two hours later, but rather ‘He was raised *on* the third day.’ The Jewish day begins at sunset. Thus, Christ died and was buried on Friday afternoon (day one); He remained in the tomb Friday sunset to Saturday sunset (day two); he was raised alive sometime Saturday night/early Sunday before the arrival of the woman on Sunday morning (day three).

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How is Christ's resurrection 'according to the Scriptures'? Both Peter and Paul appeal to Psalm 16:10, written by David, as prophesying God's raising of Christ (see Acts 2:25-32; 13:23, 29, 32-38).

But how are we to resolve the problem that there is no specific Old Testament text prophesying the resurrection 'on the third day'? The Old Testament speaks generally of salvation occurring after 'three days' (Hosea 6:2). Jesus often speaks of His resurrection occurring after three days, including the sign of Jonah (e.g., Mt. 12:39-40; Mk. 8:31; Jn. 2:19). In short, 'Christ was raised on the third day' may be a 'shorthand' way of speaking of a great saving act of God, which as it turned out, occurred historically, on the third day.

Jesus, Peter, and Paul quoted or referred to such Old Testament passages as Genesis 22:8, 14; Psalm 16:8-11; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; and Hosea 6:2. Over and over again, either directly or indirectly, literally or in figures of speech, the Old Testament foretold Jesus, death, burial, and resurrection. Twice Paul repeats the phrase 'according to the Scriptures,' to emphasize that this is no new thing, and no contradiction of true Jewish belief.

### (4) Christ Appeared to Many Witnesses (15:5-7)

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand just how well attested the resurrection of Jesus was. It is indeed an indisputable fact of history. The force of 'He was raised' and 'He appeared' when considered together emphasizes the objective reality of Christ's bodily resurrection. A merely 'spiritual' resurrection is shut out by these words.

The list of witnesses is chronological although not comprehensive, 'then' and 'next' occurring no less than four times in verses 5-7. The argument seems to be that because the raising of Jesus may be corroborated through a little diligent research, the skeptics are perverse.

The Christ who was raised on the third day appeared to various people in a known sequence on five occasions, as implied by 'next...then...next...then.' The Gospel of John also notes a specific sequence of three occasions when Christ appeared to His disciples after He was raised from the dead (Jn. 21:14; cp. 20:19, 26). Nonetheless, neither Paul's tradition nor John's account are complete. There are omissions from Paul's list – the various women witnesses (Jn. 20:14-18; Mt. 28:9), the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35), the disciples apart from Thomas (Jn. 20:19-23), the seven disciples at the lakeside (Jn. 21:2), and the Twelve in Jerusalem before His ascension (Acts 1:4-8). If the various accounts in the Gospels and in the pre-Pauline tradition are set side by side it appears there were at least twelve separate occasions when the risen Lord appeared to many hundreds of people over a thirty-seven day period between the resurrection and the ascension (Acts 1:3; cp. 13:31).

It is significant that Paul says that Jesus 'appeared' to those who saw Him after the resurrection. Until He revealed His identity to them, not even Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:14-16), the two disciples on the Emmaus road (Lk. 24:15, 31), or the disciples gathered together on Easter evening (Jn. 20:19-20) recognized Him.

#### (a) Cephias and the Twelve (15:5)

<sup>5</sup>...and that he appeared to Cephias, then to the twelve.

We know from what Paul said in the first part of this letter that Peter was much admired by the Corinthians (1:12). This man they admired was a powerful and unswerving advocate of Jesus' resurrection. Evidently the Lord Jesus had granted Peter a special post-resurrection appearance.

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This appearance is not discussed in any of the four Gospels so we assume it was something Peter told Paul about.

One of the requirements for apostleship was having seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22), and the first apostle to whom He appeared was Cephas, that is, Peter. We are not told the exact time or occasion for that appearance. In going to Peter first, Jesus emphasized His grace. Peter had forsaken the Lord, but the Lord had not forsaken him. Christ did not appear to Peter because Peter deserved to see Him most, but perhaps because Peter needed to see Him most.

Secondly, Paul cites ‘the twelve’ as witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. Paul is quite obviously using the general name for the original disciples, since Judas had hanged himself and Thomas was absent (Lk. 24:36-48; Jn. 20:19-23). What is beyond dispute is that the disciples of Jesus actually met their risen Lord.

Jesus next appeared ‘to the twelve.’ He appeared to the eleven disciples (though still often referred to as ‘the twelve’ even before Judas was replaced) as they were fearfully assembled on Easter evening (Jn. 20:19; Lk. 24:36).

### (b) Five Hundred Brothers (15:6)

*<sup>6</sup>Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.*

Paul insists that the majority of the five hundred ‘remain until now,’ that is, they were alive when he was writing 1 Corinthians. This would have been about twenty-five years after Christ rose, and in that time the five hundred must often have testified about the Lord’s resurrection. The apostle claims that this accumulation of testimony cannot be shrugged off. But some of the five hundred had ‘fallen asleep,’ which means that they were believers (unbelievers ‘die’; believers ‘fall asleep’).

Most of the five hundred who saw the risen Lord were still living at the time of Paul’s writing, and anyone who cared to do so could look them up and have the resurrection of Jesus verified!

Scripture gives no indication of who those people were, or where Jesus appeared to them, but they were surely well known in the early church, and, like the twelve, would often have been questioned about seeing the risen Savior. Even at the time of Paul’s writing, more than two decades later, most of the witnesses were still alive.

### (c) James and the Apostles (15:7)

*<sup>7</sup>Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*

The next witness is James, the brother of Jesus. Jesus’ brothers never accepted Him as the Son of God and their Lord and Savior before He died on the cross (John 7:5). James was undoubtedly converted to Christ by this special appearance. We find him and Jesus’ other brothers among the 120 disciples in Acts 1:14. James later became the leader of the Jerusalem church.

This James was the half-brother of the Lord, the author of the letter of James, and a key leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21). James was originally a skeptic. Like his brothers he did not at first believe that Jesus was the Messiah (Jn. 7:5). But now this member of Jesus’ own household, this one who for several years did not recognize Jesus as the Christ, was a witness, a

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powerful and convincing witness, to His resurrection. Perhaps, as with Paul, it was the experience of seeing the resurrected Christ that finally brought James to saving faith.

Next, Paul mentions ‘all the apostles’ as witnesses of the resurrection. This may be a reference to the time when Thomas was present with the others and was thus persuaded of the truth of Jesus’ resurrection (John 20:20-29), or it may be a reference to the ascension of Jesus into heaven (Acts 1:2-10).

### B. The Gospel That Saved Paul (1 Corinthians 15:8-11)

#### 1. The Appearance of Christ (15:8)

<sup>8</sup>*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

The appearance of Christ to witnesses in the five separate occasions listed in verses 5-7 all happened within the period of little more than a month prior to Christ’s ascension (Acts 1:2-3). It was much later that the risen and glorified Savior made His famous appearance to Saul the persecutor as he traveled to Damascus.

Finally, Paul uses his own encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9) as a proof positive of the resurrection of Jesus. Paul was a special and unique witness of the risen Lord. Paul was not among the original apostles, all of whom had been disciples of Jesus during His earthly ministry.

Paul’s words appear to answer the criticism that he was not a true apostle because he belonged neither to the ‘Twelve’ nor was he among ‘all the apostles’ who had seen the risen Christ and been commissioned by Him. By ‘last of all,’ Paul means that Christ’s appearance to him was the last in the sequence of separate appearances of the risen Christ. Paul belongs to that sequence, though he comes last in that sequence. If Cephas was the first to whom Christ appeared, Paul was the last. But ‘last of all,’ which immediately follows ‘all the apostles’ (verse 7), may also mean that Paul was also the last of the apostles to be appointed. Since there would be no more appearances of the risen Christ there would be no more apostles.

By saying he was ‘one untimely born,’ Paul was saying he was brought into the apostolate at an unusual time, much later than the others, and in a very unusual way, suddenly and almost violently.

Paul’s self-description of himself ‘as to one abnormally born’ (*hōsperei tō ektrōmati*), while difficult to understand, is probably also part of his rejoinder to his critics. This is a medical term originally applied to premature birth but also to someone ‘freakish’ in appearance. The word often signified a stillborn baby or an ejected fetus, or even a disfigured child born before term. It is unlikely that Paul is hinting at some physical abnormality that had been noticed by the Corinthians. Rather, it is more likely that he is using this term in a metaphorical sense, making a virtue of his being later than ‘the Twelve’ and ‘all the apostles’ to whom Christ appeared. Paul also glimpsed the *glorified* Christ, that is, his *parousia* brightness, *prematurely*, as it were.

*Ektrōma* (‘untimely born’) ordinarily referred to an abortion, miscarriage, or premature birth—a life unable to sustain itself. In Paul’s figure, the term could indicate hopelessness for life without divine intervention, and convey the idea that he was born without hope of meeting Christ. But the use of the term in the sense of an ill-timed birth, too early or too late, seems to fit Paul’s

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thought best. He came too late to have been one of the twelve. In carrying the idea of unformed, dead, and useless, the term was also used as a term of derision.

### 2. The Least of the Apostles (15:9)

<sup>9</sup>*For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

Despite his implied defense of his apostleship in verse 8, Paul will admit to being ‘the least of the apostles’ who does not ‘deserve to be called an apostle.’ But this is not at all because Christ appeared to him later than and outside the timeframe of the appearances to the other apostles. Rather, it is because he ‘persecuted the church of God’ that he is not fit to be an apostle. As he saw it, the sin of having been an arch-enemy of the churches remained a permanent stigma.

### 3. The Grace of God (15:10)

<sup>10</sup>*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

Paul was deeply ashamed that he had attacked the follows of Jesus (cp. 1Tim. 1:12-16). Yet, equally, he was aware of the ‘grace of God’ that had been shown to him on the Damascus Road. Christ’s call to proclaim him to the Gentiles was an expression of the Lord’s mercy that Paul humbly received at that time. That grace was not shown ‘in vain,’ or ‘emptily.’ As a result of grace shown to him Paul has labored strenuously for the past twenty-plus years, indeed, more strenuously than ‘all of them,’ that is, the other apostles of whom Paul was historically the last and, because he had been a persecutor, the least. Yet, as he emphasizes, it was not he who worked, but the ‘grace of God that was with’ him.

But Paul has come to be what he is by divine ‘grace.’ The favor of God was not ‘empty’ (*kenē*), but had transformed Saul of Tarsus into the apostle to the Gentiles. One consequence had been that over the years he ‘toiled’ more than all of them,’ ‘toil’ (*kopiaō*; cp. 4:12) signifying exhausting labor. But not even his sacrificial labors are a ground for congratulation; he applies the brake immediately: ‘...yet not I but the grace of God with me.’ ‘Grace’ is mentioned three times, Paul showing that his office has led to consistent hard work, even though nothing had been achieved through his own strength.

Paul was not boasting in his own spirituality or power but in God’s. the same grace responsible for his calling was responsible for his faithfulness. God sovereignly appointed Paul an apostle and sovereignly blessed his apostolic ministry. Paul believed, responded, obeyed, and was continually sensitive to the Lord’s leading and will. But apart from God’s prevenient grace the apostle knew that everything he did would have been in vain and worthless.

Paul never grew weary of magnifying the grace of God that saved him and enabled him to labor ‘more abundantly’ than the other apostles. Paul was not bragging; it was the grace of God that made Paul what he was, and he talked about himself only so the grace of God could be seen and appreciated.

### 4. The Gospel of the Church (15:11)

<sup>11</sup>*Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

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Even though Paul was different from the other apostles in many ways, they were united in preaching the resurrection of Jesus as an indispensable fact of history. Paul's office may have been unique, but his message was not. The persons to whom the risen Christ appeared, as listed by Paul, preach exactly the same message as Paul. Emphatically Paul belongs to that apostolic list and emphatically he preaches the same message as they do. The present tense inherent in 'so we preach' indicates that whatever the church may or may not believe, Paul and other apostles are unswerving in their ministry.

Without exception, the preaching and teaching in the early church centered on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Wherever Christ was preached and by whomever He was preached, His resurrection was the pivotal message they proclaimed. There was no dispute about the truth or the importance of the doctrine, which hardly would have been the case had it been a fabrication.

The difficulty the Corinthians' had was not with Jesus' resurrection but with their own. If they had no trouble believing in Jesus' resurrection, why did Paul begin by emphasizing the importance of it? It was because they had failed to see the ramifications of His resurrection. Paul wanted them to understand they couldn't hold to the bodily resurrection of Jesus without simultaneously holding to their own! The one entailed the other! So he begins at the beginning with what they were all agreed upon. From there, he moves into the area in which they were in disagreement.

There is an abundance of food for thought in what Paul says in these opening verses of chapter 15. Do we, in fact, understand what it is to be a Christian? Do we realize that the Christian is not simply someone who claims to be a Christian, but one who has consciously accepted the gospel message and continues to cling to that message? Do we realize that Jesus' resurrection is one of the best-attested facts of ancient history and that we need not be disturbed by those who scoff at it? Finally, in the light of the certainty of Jesus' resurrection, are we living as joyfully and triumphantly as we should?

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-28.