

What is the Gospel?

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[0 : 0 0] So let's read about the gospel now in 1 Corinthians 15 verses 1-11. Paul writes this, That he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of all the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace towards 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed.

This is God's holy word. All right, we're going to take the next three weeks to look at 1 Corinthians 15 in the run-up to Easter Sunday. 1 Corinthians 15 is Paul's argument for believing in the resurrection.

[1 : 4 0] And he starts out not with focusing on the resurrection itself, but focusing on the gospel. And then he's going to, in the next two weeks, going to show us how the resurrection fits in with the gospel and what it means for the whole of the gospel.

Now, the problem that he deals with at the very beginning of this chapter is a problem of memory. So he says, I'm here to remind you, brothers and sisters.

So it's an issue of forgetting. I don't know how often you forget things. Lately, I have resorted to really, really, really intensifying my commitment to Google Calendar because of missed appointments, missed visits to the doctor, whatever it may be.

And if I have missed something that I told you I was going to be at, I'm sorry about that. Google Calendar is here to help all of us. Our heads are leaky buckets, and so we've got to write stuff down, and we've got to constantly remind ourselves of what's happening every day.

Paul's coming to say that the memory you struggle with where somebody at St. Columbus tells you their name, and then they walk away, and seven seconds later, you cannot remember it.

[2 : 5 5] Our hearts have an even bigger problem with forgetting. So the head has a leaky bucket problem, but the heart is a leaky bucket as well. And that's what he's really dealing with is a memory issue deep down in the soul that we forget the gospel.

And so let's get right into it. What is it that we've forgotten, and how is it that we forget? And then secondly, what is the gospel? That's really the question Paul's answering for us. So let's think about those two things.

First, what is it that they've forgotten, and how did they forget it? So verse 1, you'll see down in verse 1, he says, Now I would remind you. So the Greek word there, there's a phrase there for remind, and it really translates something like, I need to re-explain it.

So he's saying, I've got to explain it over and over again to you, because you're so prone to forget. And so that's why it's translated remind here. But you see just before that in verse 1, the very first word is, Now I would re-explain the gospel.

And the word now, that conjunction there, he's connecting what he's going to do in 1 Corinthians 15 to the rest of the letter. And that's a really important moment, because 1 Corinthians 15 is sort of a moment where Paul stops and takes a breath, and says, Okay, now we've gotten to the big thing, the most important thing.

[4 : 15] And the reason it's just now getting there, after 14 chapters, is he's been, for the first 14 chapters, basically giving case studies of all the problems that have been happening in the Corinthian church.

So Corinth is a port city, and it's very cosmopolitan, in the first century, very urban, a center for the Roman Empire, in the west, in the eastern side of the Roman Empire.

And Corinth is the kind of place where you could say, What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth. It's a party city, for sure. And what's happened is, Paul planted the Corinthian church in Acts chapter 18.

You can go read all about it there. He was with them for 18 months, and he's been gone for a few years, but he's heard, through other letters that have been sent to him, things are not going well at all in the Corinthian church.

And basically, what happens in Corinth stays in Corinth, and the Corinthian culture has gotten into the church a good bit. And so, 1 Corinthians was really a set of case studies on all the big problems in the church.

[5 : 17] And if you've read it, you'll know that one of the problems was, as soon as Paul left, people started creating factions around celebrity ministers. So they said, you know, I followed, I was baptized by Apollos, and Apollos is a far better speaker than Paul.

He's a better preacher. And so they were latching themselves on to who disciplesd who. You know, they were saying, you know, I knew Tim Keller, and my grandfather was baptized by Martin Lloyd-Jones, and so that makes me better than the rest of you, and all this kind of thing.

Right? So they took the gospel, and they turned it into celebrity preacher culture. And then the next thing we read about is constant scandals. So there was big time scandals in the church, things that Paul says not even the pagan, in the pagan temples would have been tolerated.

Very embarrassing. Very big acts of public shame, and nobody was dealing with it. Big sin. Scandal. Real scandal in the church, and nobody was saying a word about it. And he goes on from there and talks about all sorts of other issues, like in worship, it was total chaos.

Everybody was speaking over each other, and you know, it would be like some of you standing up right now and saying, hold on a second, I would be far better at explaining this than you are, and you try to trade places with me, and maybe you probably would be.

[6 : 28] But that's exactly the kind of thing that was happening all the time in the Corinthian church. And so he goes case study by case study of these big issues, and then finally, when you get to chapter 15, he says, now. Okay.

How are we going to deal with this? It's not, and what does he do? He doesn't go for behavior modification. He doesn't say, stop it, stop it, stop it. Though that matters.

What he does is he says, what you need is to refill your leaky hearts with the gospel. You need the gospel over and over and over again, plunged down into your soul. Now look, the central message of the Christian, the Christian message, the core, is the gospel.

Paul says, the most important thing I can say to you is to repeat the gospel. And what he's telling us is that whether you're a first century Corinthian or a 21st century Edinburgh citizen, resident, or from somewhere else in the world, if you have believed the gospel because you heard it preached, he says, I preached it to you, you believed it, you stood in it, you put it on like it was your armor, and you've forgotten about it.

He's saying that every single one of us struggles to remember and live out of the resources of the gospel. And it could be that you do what the Corinthians do. When churches, local institutions, and Christians get the gospel into their hands and hearts, they often, we will often distort it.

[7 : 53] And one of the ways we distort it is we do what the Corinthians did. We say, the gospel's all about grace, it's all grace, and so I can live in any way I want. This is what was happening in Corinth. And they say, we call this antinomianism, cheap grace.

So we take the gospel, we distort it by saying, if it really is all grace, if I can be forgiven for anything, then I can do anything I want, and it's all fine. Another way they were distorting the gospel is they were saying, I was baptized by Apollos.

And we say, boy, I came in by the gospel, but I really want to get a seat at the table with that celebrity Christian. Some of us struggle with that. And another way we distort the gospel is we say the gospel is just a starting point.

1 Corinthians 12 and 13, you might remember, is all about gifts. And people are saying, you know, yeah, I entered in by the gospel, but the real measure in the church of who's really a Christian is the people that have achieved the ability to speak in tongues.

Right? And so they said, you get in by the gospel, but you level up with gifts, and so the gospel becomes this hierarchical platform. You start at level one and you've got to get more and more gifts along the way. And you remember in Paul's other letters like Galatians, the people had received the gospel in Galatians, but he says, what they did was they said, Jesus is just a starting point, but if you want to stay a Christian, you have to obey all the religious traditions of our culture.

[9 : 15] So we take the gospel and we turn it into religious behaviorism. That's another way we distort it. When the gospel gets into sinners' hands, we often forget about it and we twist it and we distort it, and so we could spend all day talking about the fact that we have often turned the gospel into a money-making opportunity.

prosperity, we talk about the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity gospel, the social gospel, the therapeutic gospel, the moralist gospel, the churchless gospel, the activist gospel. All the different ways right now the gospel is being twisted and distorted and forgotten about.

One that's a little more subtle that gets into the bones of the evangelical world is the gospel message that says, if I prayed a prayer at one time in my life, I now am free from the possibility of hell.

a mere get-out-of-hell-free gospel, and that's a distortion of the gospel too. And Paul says, I preached it to you, you believed it, you stood in it like it was armor, and you've let your heart, you've let the gospel just kind of seep away and you've forgotten about it.

And what he says to a very messy Corinthian church is not get your life together, behave yourselves. He says you need to hear the gospel again. You need to hear it, you need to let it soak down in your heart again.

[10 : 32] At St. Columbus, this is simple, this is basic, I know, this is old hat to many of you, but at St. Columbus, we want to be so committed to never graduating from the gospel that people get tired of how much we say the word gospel.

And sometimes people do talk about gospel, gospel, gospel, all you say is gospel, all we say is gospel. And yes, we want to be gospel-centered in every way, but that's what Paul does, you see?

He says it's not about behavior modification, it's that deep change actually comes out of the resources of the gospel. And so what is it? That's the question, point two. What is the gospel?

You might be here today and you think, I genuinely don't know what the gospel is. You might be here today and say, I do have a pretty good grasp on being able to articulate the gospel, or somewhere in between and wherever you are, from whatever background you come, Paul says you need to be reminded, no matter what condition you're in, of what the gospel is.

And so let's think about that. What's the gospel? Let me give you four elements of the gospel that Paul draws out for us here. And the first is the word gospel. He calls the message of Christianity the gospel.

[11 : 49] So if you look down at verse three, you can see what he says about it. He says that, when I was here and I planted this church, I delivered to you what is of first importance. So the word first there, the most important, the first thing, is not a chronology word.

So there are multiple words in Greek for first. But this one is not chronology. So it's not, I gave you the first thing on the path. You learn the gospel first, but then there's other things you graduate to.

The word first there is quality. It's a quality word. So the most important thing. Quality. The most important thing. So what he's saying here is I could say a lot more about the gospel than I'm about to say.

But what I want to do is take the qualitatively most important things I must say about it, the bullseye of the gospel, the very dead center, and communicate that to you. So what we're about to get is the bullseye, you know, the dead center of what the gospel is.

The gospel has rings and rings and rings. It goes out. It's so expansive. But what he's saying here is right now, I just want to give you the absolute center of what the gospel is all about.

[12 : 54] So he uses this word gospel and gospel is not a Christian word originally. The word gospel was borrowed by Christians from the Greco-Roman culture that they lived in.

It was a word that was used all across the Roman Empire for just good news. So you know this word gospel. The Greek word gospel is the word evangel. And it's got two parts.

The back half of the word gospel is the word angel. And angel isn't just a spiritual being that lives in heaven. The word angel in Greek also just means message.

And the front half of the word gospel has the little prefix! EV or EU and that just means good. So when we say the gospel is good news or a good message, it's just the literal transliteration of exactly what those two little words mean.

Evangel, the good news. That means that when Paul chooses this word, he's communicating something. He uses this word about 70 times across his letters. And he's communicating something really important and it's this.

[13 : 59] The Christian gospel is more like opening today's newspaper and reading the headlines than it is going to talk to a pastor about your circumstances in life to get advice.

The Christian gospel is more like reading the Wall Street Journal or the Times whatever your favorite newspaper is. It's more like reading the newspaper than it is going to a therapist for advice.

The gospel is news not advice. The gospel is a proclamation of a history not good advice to get your life better. The gospel is not a command.

The gospel is a pronouncement of what has happened in the middle of history. What is that pronouncement? Christ died Christ was buried Christ was raised.

That's the history that's the news. The gospel is like if you were there on Easter Sunday the Jerusalem Times on the front page would have said Christ died Christ was buried Christ is risen from the dead and that is the gospel.

[15 : 04] The gospel is a history. So what is the core message of Islam? What is Islamic salvation? What's the core message? The core message to Islam is surrender your will to Allah and seek His righteousness in your own behavior through the five pillars.

So the core message of Islam is a command to you pursue the righteousness of Allah and hope that you will achieve it. What is the core message of Buddhism? The core message of Buddhism is embrace the fourfold the four noble truths and live your life on the eightfold path to enlightenment to get beyond suffering.

So what's the core message of Buddhism? It's a command. Behave along the lines of the eightfold path and maybe you can achieve enlightenment. Christianity's core message is not a command it's not advice it is a pronouncement that God has done it all for you.

It's different than every other world religion every other philosophy that's ever existed in human history. This week the latest issue of the New Yorker came out New Yorker magazine and in it there was an article by a writer named Adam Gopnik and Adam Gopnik wrote an article by the title We're Still Not Done With Jesus and it was about the scholarly debates going on right now in the New Testament academy around the origins of Christianity and in this he gives you all the different very predominant perspectives right now.

So the spectrums where did Christianity come from? How did we get the stories of Jesus that we have? That's what he's dealing with. And he says on the one hand there's Catherine Nixie's recent book which she argues that the gospel stories 1 Corinthians 15 the message of the gospel arose out of a Jewish interpretation of Greek mythology.

[16 : 56] So Catherine Nixie suggests that the gospel stories are just re-mythologizations of Greek myths based in Jewish culture about some man named Jesus. In the middle of this spectrum there's a woman named Elaine Pagels who wrote a book where she says something more traditional in the academy she says the stories of Jesus are mixtures of real history about this man Jesus but also an evolution of legendary fables.

on the extreme side he quoted Richard C. Miller who wrote a book in 2017 very rare that anybody would argue this today but Richard C. Miller still argues that Jesus never existed he wasn't even a historical figure.

Right? So in this article Adam Gopnik takes the origins of Christianity and he puts it on the spectrum and he says these are basically the three views. Now what's the one thing missing? The one thing missing is the simplest explanation and that's the simple explanation that what the gospels record and what Paul says here about the history of Jesus actually happened.

The one thing that Gopnik and the New Yorker this week would not allow and what I want to say about this today is simply this and we're going to be talking about the historicity of the resurrection the next couple of weeks but the one thing you cannot do is you cannot come to Paul and put him on this spectrum.

Paul's view Paul's view was that Jesus Christ really did die was really dead and was really raised from the dead in real life history that's the gospel and so you can come and look at that and you can reject it that's an option but you can't treat it as anything else but a mere historical claim.

[18:37] Paul is saying this happened and that is the gospel. Now secondly of four and I have to hurry what does he say from there? He says that means the gospel is not about you it's about Jesus it's about his history but the gospel is for you that's the next thing he tells us and so if you look down again at verse 3 he says I delivered you the most important thing the gospel that Christ died real life history then there's the preposition for our sins the gospel is not about you but it is for you and that little word for there is such an important preposition in the Greek New Testament the Greek language that this Bible was written in there are only 18 prepositions in English we have 150 so the 18 prepositions in Greek do a lot of work they carry a lot of weight and meaning and you have to discern really carefully what they mean the scholarly consensus on this preposition for is really really clear what does it mean this little preposition for our sins translate it like this he died on behalf of our sin so this preposition for is saying

Jesus Christ died in your place as your substitute taking on your sin in himself that's what the for there on behalf of in our stead in our place now what this is telling us is something so important so important it's asking you do you know what the gospel really came to do really came to fix what is the greatest problem we face and Paul says the greatest problem we face is our sin our sin our choice to trespass against who God made us to be and to merit guilt before God that's what sin does that's what sin is he's saying what is the greatest problem you face today that you you have merited guilt before the living God and you are not in a state of communion with him apart from the gospel Paul says that is the greatest issue so he comes and tells us something so important Philip Reif is a 20th century sociologist that wrote a couple of books about the transition from pre-modern people to modern people and in it he talks about the distinction between what he calls pre-modern man quote unquote as religious man man by the way there means men and women that's just the old way of using that word he says there's religious man the pre-modern man and then he calls modern people psychological man what does he mean by that he says the pre-modern person across all cultures all times saw themselves as people in a state of guilt searching for the hope of salvation and then he says but modern man is psychological man and he says we have transitioned we don't see ourselves as people in the state of guilt seeking salvation and said we think of ourselves in what state the state of pain seeking pleasure he says modern man thinks of himself as the state of in the state of boredom seeking entertainment constantly needing that dopamine hit you know and if you read a book like

Neil Postman's book Amusing Ourselves to Death he says the key issue in that transition from thinking about ourselves as guilty in need of salvation to bored in need of entertainment to pain bearing in need of pain freedom he says Neil Postman says the biggest transition is the screen so he argues in Amusing Ourselves to Death that the reason we think like that is because the screen turned everything into pleasure seeking entertainment he says even when TVs came out and the news would be put up on the television the news became entertainment politics became entertainment everything became entertainment and that created an entire culture where we're entertaining ourselves to death now friend your greatest problem is not that you have pain and need pleasure not that you're bored and you need to be entertained our greatest problem is that we have guilt we bear guilt we've accrued guilt and I think as a pastor in my time as a pastor I've gotten to talk to enough people from all sorts of different backgrounds that they know subconsciously they know deep down within that over the course of a life oh boy think about it year on year day on day week on week how many things we have said and left unsaid how many things we have done against others and not done for others how many things we have thought how many things we have acted and enacted against God we know deep down in ourselves we have accrued a great debt of guilt before the Lord before God that is our greatest problem that is what the gospel came to deal with and what we're being told here of something so important how is a human being saved from this great sin problem this great guilt problem

Jesus Christ died in your place on behalf of your sins taking your guilt into himself and paying the punishment that you deserved that's what we're told now that means you can come today and say the gospel does not first bullseye does not first come to deal with our sadness the gospel does not first come to deal with our mental health the gospel does not come first to be therapy for us the gospel does not come first to deal with our circumstantial problems the first and boy it will it will deal with all that but the first thing the gospel does is it comes to deal with the fact that we owe that we have merited guilt before God the Father that's the first thing it comes to do that means you are not saved by the power of your faith today if you're a Christian you're not saved by the beauty of your trust today you're not saved by anything that you do in your mind or your heart to latch on to the gospel you're not actually saved by that what are you saved by?

Christ alone his substitutionary work on the cross that's it imagine imagine that you're in the highlands of Scotland as I was a couple weeks ago and you're walking you're hill walking and you fall terrible thing to imagine you fall off a cliff and you're barreling down a ravine you know 20 meters 30 meters 40 meters 50 meters my illustration probably breaks down because you're going too fast to do anything at this point but you're falling and there's a branch one branch that you can latch onto and do you sit there and say you know I don't know how much faith I have in this branch right now you know and do you evaluate and think syllogistically through reason can I really trust that this branch is meaningful and will give me the identity that I seek in life no what do you do if you're following 50 flights you reach out and you grab hold of the branch and you don't know a lot there's a lot you don't know but you just rest on it and you hope that it's going to save you the branch of Jesse

[25 : 53] Jesus Christ he saves your falling on that branch does not save you no falling on the branch is just how you receive his salvation your faith is falling upon that branch your trust is falling upon that branch it's not your faith that saves you boy you've got 83% faith right now while you're sitting in the pew on a Sunday but tomorrow it's going to go down to 43 right and it's going to go up and down all the time it's not the power of your faith that saves you it's the object he is for you he is on your behalf now thirdly how does this work exactly I wish I had more time but we'll work on this the next couple of weeks how does this work let me say this as brief as I can because sometimes we miss the mechanics of the gospel how does the gospel actually work let me put it like this how can a first century man a carpenter born of a backwater town like Nazareth a Bethlehem in Nazareth matter for you in 2025 so the Christian gospel says it does but how how could a man in 33 AD mean anything for me salvation for me in 2025 and here's how it works

I can say it very briefly number one Paul says Christ died for your sins because Jesus Christ is a human he could stand in your place for a human because Jesus Christ is God he could die in your place and merit infinite value to pay the debt of many that spans across every century backward and forward because he's human he can stand in your place because he's God his value can span every century as one who has paid the debt for all sin number two he says he was buried Paul says how does the gospel work Jesus Christ when he was buried he it's saying that he really did die so Paul's trying to get you to see the preposterousness of this how in the world could we imagine that God the creator would now be buried in a tomb but what is he saying he's saying he really was dead so much so that the debt of your sin really was paid if Christ almost died then the debt wasn't paid but he really was dead and so the debt was paid thirdly he says he was raised from the dead and appeared alive to more than 500 people this is where now this if you don't listen to anything else just try to come with me on this and grasp hold of this because this is where the mechanics how the gospel works is so important and sometimes this piece is missed in Romans 4:25

Paul explains it in one little line he says he was delivered to death for our sins we've talked about that he was delivered to death on my behalf paying the price for my sin my guilt but then he says he was raised to life for our justification and that's the completion of the gospel if Jesus Christ was still dead there is no forgiveness of sins but he says he was raised to life for our justification what does that mean it means this to be justified is to be pronounced guilt free your greatest problem your guilt before the Lord to be justified is when God the Father says you're guilt free you're cleansed you're forgiven there is no guilt hanging over you any longer forever how does this work the resurrection of Jesus was the justification of Jesus Christ himself okay the resurrection of Jesus was the justification of Jesus what does that mean when Jesus rose from the dead

God pronounced Jesus guilt free why because Jesus carried all of our sin in his death but when he was resurrected God is saying he's vindicated he really did completely pay for every single sin that has ever been accrued in this world he paid for it the debt has been paid it's over you know when a person when a prisoner pays their sentence that they give their time for the crime they've committed what happens next they're released you see in the resurrection it's saying Jesus Christ really did pay for everything so he deserves to be raised he deserves to be released he deserves to be vindicated and so Paul says here's the gospel here's the gospel God who stands outside of space and time can say of you today in any century whether it's 5th century BC 21st century AD 51st century so long from now any person across space and time that because

Jesus Christ is God and human and has stood in the place of all the sins of the world God can say by his justification I gift you justification I can take what he earned and I can apply it to your account no matter what century you live in and that's how the gospel works God today can take what he earned and apply it to you right now in the middle of history J.I. Packer in his book one of his books he talks about the gospel and this idea that Christ sacrificed himself for us in our place so that in his resurrection we might be vindicated we might be justified and he deals with a problem that a lot of us in the modern world have with this we look at that and we say is this not just the same thing as pagan ritual sacrifice is this not just the same thing as what many have called in the modern world cosmic child abuse

[31 : 43] God the Father sacrificing a son is this not just a big account of cosmic child abuse and he goes through and he shows yeah think about it in every world religion throughout history the pagans no matter what world religion people come to the temple and they give sacrifices to the gods trying to mollify trying to pacify trying to deal with the guilt problem they have with the gods that's everywhere why every human every society recognizes that that's our problem so all religions tend to manifest that in some way we need to pacify the gods mollify the gods propitiate turn the wrath of the gods away from us and J.I. Packer writes this what is different in Christianity there is something similar there a recognition of guilt but what is different in Christianity in all the world religions in all of paganism man humans try to propitiate or satisfy their guilt themselves man tries to propitiate his God Packer says in Christianity

God propitiates God God satisfies the wrath of God God turns away the wrath the guilt that we owe the judgment that we deserve God does it to God and this is the heart of God's radical love that for that on behalf of God did it to God God died unto God so that we might be made alive it's different than every other message all of other world religions and so let me close with this word the very last thing that happens in this passage verse 8 to 11 Paul just simply very simple Paul just simply tells his story and at the very end of this passage he says I was on my way to murder Christians and Jesus showed up in my life and God showed me that Christ at the cross was for me and all he does in verse 8 to 11 is write his testimony and he says now I know that I'm the least of all the apostles

I'm not worthy to be called one of God's children but by grace today I stand here and I am what I am remember Paul was a murderous hate filled racist that was going to murder anybody he could that followed Jesus who hated the Gentiles Paul by his religion said I am better than all of these people around me and he said when I encountered the truth about Jesus I realized what do people want in the modern world they want equality boy Paul found real equality he said in the gospel I learned that everybody is equally a sinner in need of God's grace he realized he said you know I thought I was better than everybody else around me but then when I found the gospel I realized that I'm the least I'm the worst the gospel is so humanizing it's so impartial it brings such radical equality to all people because it says to every one of us you're a sinner in need of grace all of us equal all of us in the same position you know if you make your God a political agenda if you make your God the self-salvation seeking of your career and your successes if you make your God a football team yeah if you make your God nationalism a country saying I just want everybody to know that my country is better than the next country if you make your God any of these things you will always look out and say

I am positioning myself as better than the next person somehow somehow I must be my goal in life is to have a better career a better nation a better football team a better this a better that and Paul said that's who I was but then I realized I'm just a sinner in need of grace that's all of us do you have a testimony do you have a testimony that can say I'm just a sinner in need of God's precious grace you can have a testimony let us pray Father give us a testimony today of the power of the gospel in our lives that Christ Christ died on our behalf thank you Lord Jesus we want grateful hearts this morning teach us the power of the gospel remind us today of the gospel help us to never forget the gospel so Lord send us today into our city living out of the resources of the gospel we pray in Jesus name

Amen