



1 Corinthians (2013) - Lesson 15B

Chapter 15:3-19

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- Our entry into Chapter 15 of this letter gave us a clear-eyed view of the gospel
 - Paul told the church this was the message he received from the Lord and delivered to them
 - The story has never changed:
 - Jesus died for our sins according to God's word
 - He remained dead for three days
 - Then resurrected to prove His power of death
 - This message was the one they heard and believed, if they didn't believe in vain
 - And having believed, this was the message that saved them
 - There is no other message that offers salvation
- Having seen Paul begin his teaching on resurrection in this way, we might ask why was Paul concerned about the church's understanding of the Gospel?
 - The answer as we learned last week is that the resurrection of Jesus' body is central to the gospel itself
 - If resurrection isn't true, both for Jesus as well as for us, then the hope of our faith evaporates
 - Who cares about Jesus if He isn't a solution to death?
 - If death is the end of me, then why care about Jesus' claims or teaching?
 - If I don't believe in Jesus' resurrection, then I haven't believed in the gospel
 - This is Paul's concern
 - As the church rejects the notion of resurrection, they are revealing they have never truly accepted the gospel itself
 - That's why Paul asked if they had believed in vain, which means to have never believed at all
- So as Paul moves forward in Chapter 15, he will re-establish for the church the truth of resurrection
 - Beginning with the fact that Jesus' own resurrection was affirmed by many eye witnesses, not merely by Paul's testimony alone

1Cor. 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

1Cor. 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

1Cor. 15:5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

1Cor. 15:6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;

1Cor. 15:7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

- I re-read the verses we covered last week to set the context of Paul's testimony
 - Because the resurrection is a key element in the Gospel

- Jesus lives again, we're told
- This was the message Paul delivered to the church, that their Savior was alive again
 - Jesus' death on the cross was not the end of Christianity
 - It was the beginning
 - Because Jesus lives again
- Then, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that this reality didn't depend solely on Paul's word
 - In fact, Jesus appeared to Peter first on the day of His resurrection
 - Luke tells us this in Luke 24:34
 - Then Jesus appeared to the rest of the 12 on the first night after He resurrected
 - The twelve refers to the eleven Jesus selected plus Matthias, who was selected to replace Judas by throwing lots
 - This confirms that Paul did not consider himself one of the twelve
 - Also, Paul was not called to be an apostle until long after this appearance
 - All these men can join Paul in testifying that Jesus truly was resurrected in the flesh
- Why does Paul mention Cephas specifically?
 - You should remember at the beginning of this letter how Paul addressed the problem of factions developing in this church
 - Some were saying they were "of Paul" or "of Apollos"
 - And some were saying they were "of Cephas" or Peter
 - So for those in the church who aligned themselves with Peter while rejecting the idea of resurrection, Paul reminds them that their man Peter also testified that Jesus resurrected
- Then in v.6, Paul tells the church that at one gathering Jesus appeared to over 500 believers, showing Himself to be risen and alive
 - We have no other mention of this event in scripture
 - But Paul mentions this appearance as if the Corinthian church would already know of this event
 - Since Paul is writing this letter only about 23 years after Jesus' resurrection, it's likely that the church was still familiar with the stories of Jesus' appearances
 - And it's also credible that many of those 500 witnesses were still around at this time as Paul says
 - So that if anyone in the Corinthian church doubted Paul's testimony, they had many other eye witnesses who could verify the claim of Jesus' resurrection
 - Beyond the 500, Jesus appeared to His half brother, James, and to the rest of the apostles
 - Notice that Paul separates the twelve apostles in v.5 from "all" the apostles in

v.7

- This reminds us that there were more than 12 men gifted as apostles in the early church, including men like James and Paul
- And it reminds us that no one can be considered an apostle unless he has seen the risen Lord in the flesh
 - Which is why apostles are no longer present in the church
- The Lord used these men to establish His church in the earliest days through their testimonies
- In fact, the early church was established entirely on the basis of eye witness testimony backed by spiritual power through the apostolic gifting
 - The apostles and other disciples of Jesus and others who could testify from a firsthand perspective of Who Jesus was and what He did
 - They preached His teaching
 - They demonstrated His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy
 - And they reported what they experienced when the resurrected Lord appeared before them
 - We might wonder why did anyone believe their word in the first place?
 - We might expect that many people would dismiss their testimony as simply the rantings of a crazy sect of religious fanatics
 - And many, many people did come to that conclusion
 - But some believed by the power of the Spirit, as Jesus promised

John 15:20 “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

- But as you wonder at how the church was founded on merely the testimony of a few men, don’t forget that this is still how the church grows today
 - Nothing has changed, really
 - Jesus’ followers take the message of Who Jesus is and what He has done, and we preach it to the world
 - We too show how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy
 - And like the early church, we also have eye witnesses who testify that Jesus truly died and resurrected
 - Where do we this eye witness testimony? In the New Testament
 - The New Testament writers are all apostles, for that was the test required before a writing could join the canon of scripture
 - All New Testament scripture was authored by an apostle who saw the resurrected Lord
 - And we have their eye witness testimonies still today in the form of the Gospels and the letters

- Truly, we're in the same situation that the early church found itself in, bringing a message to the world that many will reject but some will receive
 - It's a message that must be accepted on faith in God's word
 - Just as the early church grew on those who had faith in the eye witness testimony of men Christ chose to carry that message
 - Today the church grows on the basis of faith in the word of God, where these same testimonies have been recorded for our sake
 - This is why Paul says elsewhere in Romans 10:17

Rom. 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

- Finally, Paul reminds the church that he also saw the risen Lord

1Cor. 15:8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

1Cor. 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

1Cor. 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

1Cor. 15:11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

- In great humility, Paul describes himself as the the least of the apostles
 - He says he was the last one to see the risen Lord, which is true
 - Paul's experience happened while he was traveling on a road from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria
 - This event occurred many years after the earlier appearances
 - But this was no less an appearance of the resurrected Lord
 - In fact, it's fair to say it was an even more dramatic appearance than the others
 - Even though Paul is confident he was every bit as much an apostle as any of the others, he also acknowledges his apostleship came in a different way
 - Paul says in v.8 that he was "untimely born"
 - The phrase in Greek literally means abnormally born
 - In fact, the phrase was used in Greek to describe a premature birth or even an abortion
 - By the context, Paul meant his commissioning of an apostle came in a very different way than the first twelve
 - Paul wasn't appointed by the Lord in the early days of Christ's ministry as were the other apostles
 - Paul didn't spend three years walking with Christ before His death
 - And in fact, before he was an apostle, Paul was the chief persecutor of the church

- So in these ways, Paul certainly did not have the typical entry into his apostleship
- Nevertheless, Paul says by the grace of God, he is what he is as an apostle
 - By God's unmerited favor – and nothing else – Paul became the apostle who then founded the Corinthian church
 - His history of disobedience, ignorance and hatred toward God's people were overlooked by God
 - And in mercy the Lord called Paul into faith and commissioned him to accomplish great things
 - God's mercy to Paul was also mercy to the rest of us
 - Because when God converted a man like Paul, the Lord gave the rest of us hope indeed
 - And the more you reflect on what God could accomplish through a man like Paul, the more reason you have to serve Christ despite your weaknesses
 - You and I may not be the most talented or well-trained servants of Christ
 - We may have come to faith late in our lives or simply waited a long time to live up to our faith
 - We may be saddled with physical limitations, financial limitations, emotional baggage, and self-doubt
 - We may have a past that includes great sin and shameful behaviors
 - But I believe Paul's example exists just so God can remind us that such things are not barriers to God's grace
 - Our life before Christ does not dictate our usefulness to God
 - Our talents or strength are not limitations to God's power working through us
 - Our reputations as unbelievers went to the grave with Jesus
 - So that we can serve Him in a new life

Rom. 6:4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

- And this is what Paul did, for he says God's grace given to him wasn't in vain
 - Because Paul made the most of the opportunity the Lord gave him
 - Paul labored more than any other apostle, Paul says
 - He started late but ran faster
 - Which is clearly evidenced both by Paul's journeys and his writings, which form the bulk of the New Testament canon
 - Remember, there were many apostles, some of whom you have never heard mentioned
 - We don't even know their names

- And others we may know by name, like Matthias, yet we see no record of their work recorded in scripture
- Perhaps some of them are missing from scripture because they didn't work very hard in their appointed office
- Perhaps they were not as diligent or dedicated to the task the Lord appointed
- I can't say what's true in the case of the apostles, but I can say that we face a similar choice in our walk with the Lord
 - We can take the grace given to us and make the most of it
 - Or we can be the one who causes God's grace to be given in vain
 - The one who squanders the opportunity the Lord gave us to serve Him
 - Clearly, we should seek to imitate Paul's example
- So Paul's opening argument in favor of resurrection is that many eye witnesses testified to the reality of Christ's raising from the dead
 - This brings us to Paul's second argument in support of resurrection, an argument from logic

1Cor. 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?

1Cor. 15:13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;

1Cor. 15:14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.

1Cor. 15:15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

- Paul now begins to demonstrate that the Corinthians' view on resurrection was self-contradictory with their Christian message
 - First, Paul asks the question if the heart of the Gospel message itself claims that Jesus resurrected, then how can the Church also preach that there is no such thing as resurrection
 - If we hold that there is no such thing as a dead body coming back to life, then by necessity we would be saying that Christ's dead body was never resurrected either
 - And if Christ was never resurrected as our Gospel message claims, then our preaching is in vain
 - Once again, the word vain means empty or amounting to nothing
 - In other words, if Christ didn't actually rise from the dead, then we are preaching a worthless message to the world
 - More importantly, if the message the church is preaching to others is worthless, then the church's faith is also empty and worthless
 - Our faith in something is only as sound and valuable as the object of our faith
 - If we place our faith in something that is worthless, then our faith is itself

worthless

- I think many unbelievers go through life assuming that generic faith will save them
 - That even if they happen to place their faith in the wrong thing or wrong person, God will nevertheless give them credit for the sincerity of their faith
 - It's very fashionable these days for people to describe themselves as "spiritual"
 - And for people to talk about "faith" in abstract terms, as in "I'm a person of strong faith," without ever defining the object of their faith
 - But blind faith is not saving faith, according to scripture
 - And neither is sincerity
 - You can be sincerely wrong and die in your sins
 - That is the point Paul is making here – he points out that they cannot simultaneously claim faith in Christ while at the same time denying the very object of that faith
 - Christians have faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
 - Because we find our hope in believing that just as the Son was raised from the dead, so shall we be
 - To reject the resurrection is to reject Christ
- Moreover, Paul says in v.15 that if the testimonies of resurrection are not true, then all the apostles are false witnesses
 - These men were universally lying about the resurrection, because all say that Jesus died and was resurrected
 - They all testified that Jesus rose from the dead
 - But if the entire concept of resurrection is false, then we have no choice but to conclude that all the apostles were frauds and liars
 - If so, then why do the Corinthians care about anything Paul or another apostle says concerning Christ and Christianity?
 - Why bother with any of it if you believe that the cornerstone claim is nothing but a lie?
 - Imagine you were on a jury hearing testimony from a witness in a trial when you learned that a key detail in a witnesses' testimony turns out to be a lie
 - Would you trust anything else this witness said?
 - No
 - Likewise, Paul says the church is taking a self-contradictory stance concerning Paul's testimony
 - The church is willing to accept Paul's word that Jesus was Lord
 - That the Gospel saves them from sin and that they have become children of God by faith
 - And yet they believe resurrection is impossible, which means Paul was lying when he testifies that Jesus resurrected
 - C.S. Lewis made a similar observation about those who say Jesus the man was a

good teacher or even a prophet of God, yet they don't believe His claims to being God in the flesh

- That is a mutually self-contradictory stance, which C.S. Lewis summed up in his book *Mere Christianity* with the phrase “liar, lunatic or Lord”
- Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or He was truly Lord
 - He can't be merely a good teacher, because He claimed to be one with God
 - He can't be a good role model or prophet because He told people that unless they follow Him, they will not see the Father
 - The only sensible stance we can take is that Jesus was a liar or a lunatic... or He was truly Who He said He was: Lord
- This is the dilemma facing the church in Corinth
 - They cannot reject resurrection as a concept while still embracing the Gospel
 - They cannot follow Paul and Apollos as leaders in the church while simultaneously thinking they are lying about key facts
 - They cannot say they believe in the Gospel while rejecting its source of hope
 - So Paul brings this chain of logic to its inevitable conclusion

1Cor. 15:18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

1Cor. 15:19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

- ○ If resurrection isn't possible, then those believers who have already died in Christ have perished
 - Paul uses a euphemism for death: sleep
 - To sleep in the context of a discussion of resurrection is a reference to dying
- Paul asks what would it mean for those believers who have already died if resurrection never happens
 - It would mean that these people will never again live
 - They were allowed to live once, but then they have perished
 - The Greek word for perish is *apollumi*, which means to be utterly destroyed
 - To cease to exist at all
- In other words, without the promise of resurrection, we would have to conclude that our present life on earth is the only life we have
 - And if that were true, then the hope we have been given in Christ is an earthly hope only
 - The benefits of placing our trust in Jesus cannot extend past the grave, and so what good are they at all?
 - Adopting the Christian viewpoint means placing yourself in a position of suffering
 - It means self-denial in an attempt to obey the Lord

- It means hardship
- And if it goes no further than that, then of what value was it?
 - Paul says if it were true that we perish when we died, then we are the most pitiful of all men on earth
 - While the rest of the world at least gets to enjoy their brief life on earth, we would be suffering for the sake of Christ but to no reward
 - For scripture tells us that the rewards of our service to God come in a future time on earth
 - But we can only enjoy those future moments if we're alive again to experience them
- Jesus made this same observation during an encounter with the Sadducees, which was a religious sect within Israel that also rejected the notion of resurrection
 - As Jesus was addressing their challenge to Him concerning resurrection, He answered them this way

Luke 20:37 “But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB.

Luke 20:38 “Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him.”

- Jesus reminded the crowd that God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
 - That covenant promised these men they would inherit the land of Canaan one day
 - But all these men died without having received those promises in their lifetimes
 - Therefore, the only way God can remain true to His promises is if these men live again one day
 - And in that future day, the Lord will finally fulfill His promises to them to give them the land
 - And then they will enjoy the inheritance God promised
- So Paul has concluded his correction of the church for their foolish thinking on the matter of resurrection
 - Next, he begins his teaching on the true understanding of resurrection
 - Including on the way it happens and why it must happen
 - And also, the timing for when it will happen to every believer in Jesus Christ