

That of First Importance

Easter 2018

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1 Cor. 15:1-11

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What is the most important thing in your life? What gives you purpose? What are you willing to die over?

The world tries to tell you what to value. Through commercials; pop culture; social trends and gossip; and so many other ways, the world tries to say this is the most important thing you could have for your life, or that is. Technology; clothes; movies; the largest or cleanest houses; the list goes on and on. Perhaps even pride. Whether or not you get your way, or whether or not everyone lets you do things the way you want. Are any of those things the most important thing in your life? That of first importance?

God tells us this morning what is the most important thing, what should be and is the most important thing for any person's life: the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He speaks to us this message through His servant Paul, who had received divine revelation of Jesus' resurrection on the road to Damascus.

Indeed, God gave Paul such proof on the road to Damascus that Paul didn't need to confer with the other apostles or anyone else about who it was he had seen. But at the same time, Paul will also point to how Jesus' death and resurrection were "according to the Scriptures," pointing out the need for the Scriptures in bearing the truth of God's Word.

Let us turn this Easter morn, then, to our Epistle text from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Verse 1

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve."

Paul had not been in fellowship with the other apostles when Jesus had walked among them. He was not there with them when Jesus was crucified. And he was not there with them when Jesus showed Himself to Peter and Mary outside His tomb, or in the upper room later that first Easter day. No, Paul wrote in our text that he "received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." Paul had not been among the apostles, yet he still considered the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that "of first importance." He wrote this to those brothers and sisters gathered at Corinth so that they might also remember and believe that the truth of the Gospel is the most important thing in their lives as well.

Paul wrote this way to the believers in Corinth because it was to them he wrote about not having divisions in their churches. In the third chapter of this letter, he asked them, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:5-7)." Then Paul continued in the twelfth chapter: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:12-13a)."

In this way Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he had not originally been an apostle, but that he was delivering to them what he himself had learned was the most important message: the Gospel of Jesus' death and

resurrection in the place of all sinners, least of all himself. That is what every pastor preaches, as Paul pointed out. Whether it was Apollos, Paul, or any pastor worth his salt from them to the ones who are presently preaching, that which is of first importance is the Gospel that we also have received from those before us.

Verse 2

Continuing his writing on the resurrection of Jesus, Paul wrote: “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 the apostles, because I persecuted the church of God. 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 received the Gospel of Christ, as mentioned earlier, through the appearance of Christ Himself to him. That is why Paul felt as “one untimely born.” “But by the grace of God,” Paul considered himself to be what he was: a messenger of Christ’s Gospel to the Gentiles, as he had been called to be on the road to Damascus.

It is by the grace of God that each of us are what we are: Christians, believers in our Lord Jesus Christ. First the women, and then the apostles, and finally even Paul himself were shown that Jesus was risen from the dead, and today, we continue to proclaim that He is risen. He is risen, indeed, Alleluia!

As one to whom Christ made an untimely appearance, Paul felt as an aborted child; but he knew the purpose to which God had called him. For that reason, Paul “worked harder than any of them, though it was not (he), but the grace of God that (was) with (him).” No pastor, no matter his personality, brings people to faith in Jesus. Not Paul, not Apollos, not any pastor. Paul put it well that it was not he, but “the grace of God” which brought many to faith through him. That grace was the Holy Spirit, who works through the means of grace—the Word and Sacraments—to bring us and all who will come to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection for their forgiveness. It is the Holy Spirit who has shown us and continues to show us and everyone who will believe it that that of first importance is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 3

That’s why Paul concluded that “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.”

While Paul felt like one who had been called in an untimely fashion, he here acknowledged that God had called him to proclaim His Son, Jesus Christ, to the world—in person—just as God had called the other apostles in person as well. “(S)o we preach,” Paul wrote, demonstrating that he humbly accepted God’s call to proclaim Christ crucified and risen along with the other apostles.

“(A)nd so you believed.” Through the work of Paul, the apostles, and all the men that God calls to preach for Him, God brings many to faith. Again, it is not by the men, it is not by Paul, or Apollos, or any other preacher, but “by the grace of God that is with (us).” It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us and calls us to faith.

Of ourselves we are poor, miserable sinners, blind, dead, enemies of God. But through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to believe the Gospel and to be children of God. And so we do. We believe that Jesus’ death on the cross was to take away our sins—all the ways in which we have sinned against God and against each other—and we receive His forgiveness for the sake of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And our Lord is risen—He is risen indeed, Alleluia!—showing us that God will not leave it here, but that He will be

coming again to bring us home, in our own restored bodies, just as Jesus was raised, and eventually ascended into heaven—in His own body. All praise, glory, and honor be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who has worked this faith into us—this faith which is of the first importance. In Jesus' Name. Amen.