

1 Corinthians 15:1-11
The Reality of the Gospel
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I like watching a reality television show called “Capture.” Now I know some of you might rightly cringe when I say the words “reality television.” But stick with me for a few minutes so I can tell you a little about “Capture.” Capture is a mix between capture the flag, paintball, and the Hunger Games. And since I’m from the mountains of Colorado, I like all of those things. In Capture 12 teams run around 4,000 acres with cameras and high-tech equipment. Their goal is to survive for a month without getting captured by other players—hunters.

Every few days a new hunt team is selected and their mission is to capture their prey. If a team can survive for the whole hunt, they win \$250,000. Each day of the hunt the prey knows the hunters are coming. So they keep running around in the woods hoping to evade capture. They keep moving because it could save them. Now this show isn’t the most real of reality television shows. At the end of every episode it says some scenes are recreated. But I think this show has something unique many other shows don’t. Something about its essence rings true to the way the world works.

Many of our coworkers, friends, family members, and even us feel like prey. We feel as if someone or something is always out to get us. We attribute our feeling of helplessness to our jobs, our bills, or our health. But I think something else is going on. There really is a hunter and we are the prey. Scripture tells us Satan prowls around “seeking someone to devour.” But I think the hunter is much closer than we think. The hunter is our own sin and it’s inside us. And no matter how fast we run we’ll never outrun our own sin. So we as humans begin to look for ways to win our salvation. Some search for salvation in their careers, others in philanthropy, more in religion. Some even look for salvation in reality television.

But in a real world of real risk who is right and what is real? The Bible tells us the truth about reality. It tells us we are indeed prey to sin. But it also offers a message of hope. It offers a message of salvation.

So what is this hope? Is this hope real? How can we escape sin? The gospel offers real salvation. (Read v. 1-2)

The gospel offers real salvation. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church of Corinth. And to put it bluntly—the church of Corinth has lost their way. False teachers have fooled them. Sexual sin has shamed them. And the gifts of the Spirit have confused them. They’re so confused they’ve forgotten their salvation. They’re doubting the gospel and losing their way. So Paul reminds them of the saving gospel. He says first, the gospel has saved them. Second, the gospel is the foundation of their salvation. And third, the gospel saves and will save them.

First, the gospel has saved them. (v. 1) This is what Paul means when he reminds them of “the gospel... which you received.” Another way of saying this is “the gospel which you took over” or “took to heart.” The Corinthian church is full of committed Christians. It is full of Christians who have owned the gospel for themselves. But they seem to have forgotten that the gospel is more than a one time act.

Second, the gospel is the foundation of their salvation. (v. 1) This is the gospel “in which you stand.” Now this verb is in what grammarians like to call the “perfect tense.” It’s a significant tense because it says “slow down and pay attention.” Because what happened in the past has implications for the present. Yes you “were saved” but you are to continue on in “the saving faith.” Paul calls them to actively establish themselves in the gospel given to them. They are to stand firm in the gospel because it is the foundation of their salvation.

Third, the gospel saves and will save them. (v. 2) Paul says the gospel is that “by which you are being saved.” This is also in the “perfect tense” so we need to slow down again. Although the last perfect was in the active voice, this one is passive. It’s in the passive voice—“you are *being* saved.” That means God, not them, is the one saving them. They are the passive recipients of salvation now and in the future. Just as God saved them, he is continuing to save them, and he will save them.

Chances are you probably don’t remember your first breath. But that first breath was very important. As a baby that first breath saved your life. But you need to keep breathing. And if you want to keep living you’ll need to keep breathing. But although breathing is active, it’s also passive. It’s not something we think about because we breathe naturally. The gospel is the breath of the church. When we took our first breath of the gospel we came alive. Believing in the gospel is our pattern for breathing. And we must continue believing the gospel if we want to live. Otherwise, as Paul says, “you believed in vain.” But God promises his church will never stop breathing. Individual churches may stray from the gospel and suffocate. But God will ensure his universal church continues to breathe. And by breathing the gospel we are saved. The gospel offers real salvation.

So what exactly is the gospel message? What is the heart of the gospel? The gospel is Jesus’ real death and real resurrection. (Read v. 3-4)

Jesus really died for our sins. (v. 3) Paul didn’t invent a new religion by himself. Paul is not like Joseph Smith or Muhammad. Paul didn’t single-handedly come up with a new theology. Instead, he’s sharing what was affirmed by many others.

He’s sharing “Christ died for our sins” or “Christ died on behalf of our sins.” This is the full atonement. That Jesus died in our places to take on our sins. And instead of death he gives us his righteousness. This is the great exchange. And it’s so essential Paul says it’s “of first importance.” It’s so important that the gospel message begins at the atonement. And it’s all in fulfillment of OT prophecy; “in accordance with the Scriptures.”

The prophet Isaiah wrote the whole book of Isaiah 600-700 years prior to Christ. Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” In this verse Isaiah prophesied the suffering servant would pay for our sins. But that his payment would also bring us peace and healing—full atonement. Verse 5 of Isaiah 53 is the “burning heart” of the Old Testament. The atonement is the “burning heart” of the gospel. Jesus really died for our sins.

How can we know Jesus really died? Jesus was really dead in the grave. (v. 4a) Scripture emphasizes “his burial” so that we know Jesus really died. Jesus didn’t just almost die—he really died. He so died his own followers entombed his body. They sealed him in a tomb and they went away mourning. In America we don’t

really have tombs. When I went to Croatia this summer I got a better sense of what a tomb is like. In Croatia families bury their members under what looks like marble slabs. I got the chance to look over the edge of one without the marble cover. From my angle at about 2-3 feet away I couldn't see the bottom. As you can imagine I didn't want to get much closer than that. Each family grave had a simple conveyor and rack system. Two coffins fit next to each for maybe 6-12 coffins deep. I think I'd rather be buried six feet under than six coffins under. Jesus descended into this darkness to pay for sins. Jesus descended into this darkness to really die. Jesus was really dead in the grave.

So what hope is there if Jesus really died? Isn't everything lost if Jesus died? Jesus really rose from the grave. (v. 4) We know this because three days later the grave was empty. It was so empty Jesus' enemies made up stories about his disciples stealing the body. If the body was still in the tomb, they wouldn't have needed to make up stories. So we know Jesus really died and that his body really left the grave. And this too is in fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture.

King David crafted a Psalm about Christ's resurrection a 1000 years before Jesus. Psalm 16:10 says, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." The prophet Hosea also spoke of the three-day resurrection 700 years prior to Jesus. Hosea 6:2 also says, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." God raised Jesus from the grave in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. When Paul says "he was raised" he's once again using the perfect tense verb. More exactly this perfect is classified as a consummation of the perfect. This is because the resurrection is the consummation of the gospel. The resurrection is the peak reason for our belief in Christ. In other words, Jesus really rose and it really matters now. Jesus really rose from the grave.

But why does this matter? Why is the gospel so important? Jesus really died and really rose so we can really believe. (Read v. 5-11)

The church really believed Jesus died and rose again. (v. 5-6) Paul first witnessed the resurrection of Christ directly. But that witness was affirmed by many other accounts. Notice it's not one or two or even three. First Jesus appeared to Cephas who we call Peter. Then Jesus appeared to his disciples. And then to 500 fellow believers at once. And when Paul is writing this letter most of those 500 are still alive. So if any part of his story were wrong they could have said so.

It's as real as when our Senior Pastor stood up here and preached last week. Maybe some of you wouldn't believe me if I told you he preached up here. But you don't have to just take my word for it. You can ask the over two-hundred other people who were here. Paul says the same thing, "If you don't believe me, go ask them." The church really believed Jesus died and rose again.

But how do we know these people didn't just want to believe? How do we know they didn't come up with a crazy story and choose to believe? The church was made of skeptics who became believers. (v. 7-9) The text specifically mentions James and Paul. James was Jesus' brother and the NT tells us he had a hard time believing. Paul was a zealot who persecuted the church of God. But Jesus appeared to both of them. Radical skeptics became radical believers willing to die for Jesus. That says a lot about the reality of the gospel. It's one thing to convince your followers. It's another thing entirely to convince your enemies. The church was made of skeptics who became believers.

The believers were made up of men who wouldn't just believe anything. The disciples were mostly fishermen. The reality television show *Wicked Tuna* is filmed up on the North Shore. It's about some tough guys who live in "Glousta" and fish for "tune-er". They recently caught a 920 pound tuna fish—we're talking about Jaw's little brother. And when they caught this horse-sized fish they went crazy. One of the guys named Gourley said, "I just thought, this is amazing. I can't believe that it actually happened to us because it's just a once in a lifetime gift."¹ This is the same way the disciples would have felt. They too knew that the resurrection was a "once in a lifetime gift." And so they began to share it with the whole world. Middle-eastern fishermen became radical fishers of men.

One of the other "Glousta" fisherman said that catching the fish ruined them. It ruined them because they're never going to catch a fish that big again. You're never going to hear a message bigger than the gospel. And it's my prayer for you that the gospel would ruin you. May the gospel so ruin you that you go crazy unless you share it. The believers were made up of men who wouldn't just believe anything.

And what did God call these new believers to do? How did God call them to respond to the news about Jesus? The church is called to humbly believe the gospel. (v. 10-11) Sometimes it's great to read through a book of the Bible in one sitting. If you do this with 1st Corinthians, you'll see it is like a giant sandwich. The middle chapters, 3-14, are all about church governance, guidance, and gifts. These chapters are the meat, cheese, and lettuce. And chapters 1-2, and 15 are about the gospel. Those chapters are the bread. The book has a lot of topics in the middle, but it opens and closes with the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul speak of those "who are being saved" and again in 15:2. In 1 Corinthians 1:23 Paul preaches Christ crucified and in 15:11 he preaches again. He begins and ends with the gospel because the church needs the gospel. We need to internalize, love, and grasp the gospel as we share it. Everything we say and do has to be marked by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel is our breath and if we forget to breathe we will die. The church is called to humbly believe the gospel.

But if all we do is believe and never share than we're missing out. What are we called to do besides believe? The church is also called to humbly share the gospel. (v. 10-11) Paul is a great example of this. He recognizes that he is not worthy to receive the gospel. He's not worthy to believe in Jesus. He's not worthy to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But God has called him to preach the gospel anyways. Do you realize you're also not worthy to hear the gospel? Nothing inside you makes you worthy to hear the good news about Jesus. You're a sinner and you deserve the full judgment of God. But God loves you and offers grace. And for those who believe he calls to share the gospel. Paul humbly accepted the call to witness about Christ. Will you humbly accept the call to witness about Christ? Are you willing to share even though you don't deserve it? The church is called to humbly share the gospel.

But why does it matter if we share? Why do we need to believe? Jesus really died and really rose so we can really believe. We can really believe that death is not the end. We can really believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We can really believe that when death knocks Christ already answered the door. My friend gave permission to share this story. My childhood friend Rachel back in Colorado was just diagnosed with uterine cancer. She stands close to where some of you have stood. In this moment do you think the reality of the gospel matters? Do you think Jesus' real death and resurrection are important?

¹ http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57597644/fishermen-engage-in-epic-battle-with-920-pound-tuna-in-massachusetts-gloucesterc-harbor/

Rachel comes from a Christian family who is also Jewish. Her grandmother is 85 years old and on her deathbed with cancer. She has not believed in the gospel for her entire life. But when she heard her granddaughter had cancer she finally believed. When she heard the news all she could say is, “We need Jesus—all we need is Jesus.” What a bitter-sweet week. Bitter because sin has its sting. Sweet because the gospel is real. Sweet because Rachel and her grandmother stand together in Christ. They stand firm in the death and resurrection of Jesus no matter what comes next. And you can too by putting your faith in a real savior. Jesus really died and really rose so we can really believe.

The strange truth about reality television is that most of it isn't real. Most reality television scenes are staged with a pre-written script. So as people watch reality television they begin to wonder what's real. This sense of not knowing what is real has invaded our entire culture. It leads people to lose all hope of ever knowing what is true. And so everything must be true because we can't know for sure. They are right about one thing Reality television isn't real. But what we believe is real. The good news about Jesus is really true. Jesus really died and really rose so we can really believe.

We have a real message of hope for a really lost world. And who are we to deserve to share this message of redemption? Like Paul we don't deserve the reality of the gospel. But God has chosen you and me to take this message to the lost. So as we end this sermon let's get excited about the gospel. Let's get excited about sharing what is real with people who need reality. Jesus really died and really rose so we can really believe.