

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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"First of all," The Gospel's Top Priority

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet 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 which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Therefore whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed. (1 Corinthians 15:1–11, KJV 1900)

Listen to a dozen different preachers, and you'll likely think that a dozen different ideas are the most important segment of the gospel. Not only do modern non-Christians struggle with priorities, but Christians, even preachers, do as well. Paul strips away the veneer and takes us directly to the heart of the gospel in this chapter, including its most important and most foundational truth, "...first of all...."

Although at the time of Paul's writing First Corinthians, the Corinthian Church was confused and divided in conduct and in its beliefs, apparently at one time, when he first preached to them, they believed and were united, "...which also ye received." Even in their present disarray and confusion, they worked at standing in it as they should, "...wherein ye stand." They seem to have been staggering profoundly, but Paul kindly honors their effort.

"By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you." Folks who see heaven in the Bible every time they read the word "Saved" might have something of a problem with this verse. If you are saved only when you have the gospel prominently in your mind, your eternal destiny stands in frightening instability. You go to church on Sunday morning and hear a good sermon. It is in your mind. Heaven is yours. On Monday morning you walk into your office or place of business and face a surprising and complicated string of problems. You immerse your mind in solving them. You are so involved in those problems that you don't even think about lunch or much of anything else all day long. You definitely didn't keep your faith in memory during the day. Think. Stress is an insidious force to both our mind and our body. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the stress claims its prey. You have a massive heart attack and die. You didn't have your faith in Jesus and the resurrection in your mind at that moment.

You were up to your neck trying to resolve your business problems. So, do you go to heaven or not? Are you "saved" or not? You were definitely not keeping Jesus and the resurrection in your mind at the moment of your death. If going to heaven when you die is what Paul intended by being saved in this verse, you just lost out, didn't you? I suggest that being saved in this verse has nothing to do with going to heaven when you die. If so, heaven may be frightenly underpopulated. Contemporary Christians need to rethink the Bible's use of "salvation." We would be wise and far more accurate in our understanding of Scripture if, when we see any form of "Save" in a verse, we'd ask of the passage, "Saved from what?" "Saved by what or by whom?" "Saved to what or to whom?" "Saved how?" (After all, some Bible contexts present salvation as an exclusive act of God alone, while others present it as something that we do in partnership with Him, but distinctly by our faithful action) While Scripture uses this word across a very broad spectrum, we may logically break it down into two major categories. Given that populist Christianity is so fixated on going to heaven when we die when they read the word, we can distinguish the Bible's use of the word to those occasions when heaven and eternity really are its objective versus when the context is dealing with discipleship and temporal issues in the here and now. I suggest that few verses in the Bible, when interpreted in context, more clearly make the case for this approach than this verse. To force the idea of being saved only as we keep the gospel in our memory into going to heaven when we die borders on the nonsensical. To view the verse as relating to our peace of mind and to our present discipleship is altogether sensible and logical. More important, this idea matches the context in which Paul uses the word in the verse.

Paul follows his "...first of all" point with the leading theme of the gospel, as the New Testament teaches the gospel, "...how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures." Christians of every stripe will tell you their belief about Jesus and His death, but they each give you a different "Take" on the "How" of His death. We need to go to Scripture for our answer to the "How" question, not to our private interpretations or beliefs. From perhaps the most mundane perspective, you will often read in newspapers around Easter time the question, "Did the Romans or the Jews kill Jesus?" And the answers will vary according to the author's personal opinion. If we follow Scripture, we will discover two answers. First, based their wicked motives, both Romans and Jews were charged with the crime. Secondly, and far more to the Biblical point, John 10:17-18 and similar passages remind us that no human on earth was capable of killing Jesus. He voluntarily gave Himself in death to the Father for our sins.

The greater point of the "How" of Jesus' death will take us in a different direction. Yes, He died on His own terms. But this point fails to adequately address the "How" question at all. He had no personal sin, so we can't say that He died for His own sins. Not only did He voluntarily give His life in death, but He also voluntarily came into this world as a man. "For I came down from heaven..." (John 6:38) No other person who ever lived chose his birth circumstance, but Jesus chose both His birth and His death circumstance. So the "How" of His death must lead us to ponder motives and objectives in Himself alone and not in those who hated and rejected Him.

"...for our sins." A primary definition of the Greek word translated "for" in this verse means "Over, above, or in behalf of." I think of the mythical "Sword of Damocles." In the myth, the king, while apparently living in luxury actually lived under a large sword that hung directly over his head, suspended only by a horse hair. It could drop at any moment, and he would die. Not only did Jesus live under the weight of our sins, they actually fell on Him, and He took their legal and damning weight off of His people and onto Himself. He suffered at the hands of divine justice what we deserved so that we could realize the full outpouring of God's love and grace. When the sword of justice was suspended and ready to drop, He stood "Over" us, between the sword and us, so that He, not we, suffered the death of its blow. This thought takes us far closer to the "How" of Jesus' death than any empty discussion of Roman or Jewish blame.

"...according to the Scriptures." At the time of his writing, Paul specifically refers to the Old Testament Scriptures. With this point in mind, I started this series in the Old Testament and spent significant time there before moving to the New Testament account of the actual event of "Jesus and the resurrection." Some scholars have documented two or three hundred different Old

Testament passages that include some element of prophecy regarding Jesus and His coming. Some of them may be a brief reference. Others, Isaiah 53 for example, include a detailed account. If you focus on the four gospels in the New Testament, specifically on their description of Jesus' activities during that last week in Jerusalem, including His death and resurrection, you will find more references to fulfilled Scripture than in any other portion of the New Testament. The single most powerful witness to Jesus' death, to the "How" of His death, available for our instruction is Scripture itself. Paul will go on to document the many eyewitnesses who saw Jesus in person after His resurrection, including over five hundred people who saw Him at one time, but, for Paul, and for us, if we think rightly, the most powerful witness to the "How" of Jesus' death is Scripture. When Jesus answered the unbelieving Sadducees' trap question about the resurrection, which they denied, He made this point. They erred based on two major flaws in their thinking. They did not know the Scriptures, and they did not know the power of God. (Matthew 22:29) With these two flaws, they couldn't know anything about God correctly.

While Jesus' death is essential for our understanding of why He came and what He accomplished for us, we cannot stop at His death. After His death on the cross, He was buried in a borrowed tomb. Then He arose from the dead, no less literally, physically, or bodily than His death. Paul goes to great length to list those who were eyewitnesses of His resurrection. Do not overlook that Paul lists himself as an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection. A likely reference to his Damascus Road experience, Paul didn't merely have a mental experience, but he also literally saw Jesus so that he, despite being late in his arrival on the scene of believers, could legitimately include himself as yet one more eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. When a Navy officer wants to call all of his people together for something important, supposedly he uses the command, "All hands on deck." When God prepared His people for the news of Jesus and the resurrection, for those men whom He had chosen to be His personal eyewitnesses of this central fact of the gospel, He issued His own "All hands on deck." He gave Paul an untimely revelation of Himself in resurrection. He sent word to then-absent Peter, "...and Peter." (Mark 16:7; so very soon after Peter had publicly denied even knowing Him)

Paul briefly, but in compelling words, includes in this passage an account of how this knowledge of Jesus and the resurrection impacted his life. Folks, you can't believe in Jesus and the resurrection and not be changed, wondrously so, by the knowledge. Are you and I showing by our personal conduct that we truly believe this truth? Does our life manifest to those around us that we believe Him to be alive and ruling on heaven's throne?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor