

## **“Is It True?”**

### **The Gospel Series, No. 11**

#### **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

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We conclude this series of sermons on the Gospel by addressing a question, the answer to which determines whether we have been wasting our time these past ten Lord’s Days. It is all very well to say that the good news is that God himself has entered the world to accomplish our deliverance from sin and death. There are plenty of people today and there have always been plenty of people who knew that this is what Christians claimed to have happened. But is that story – that account of the incarnation of the Son of God, his death on the cross for our sins, his resurrection from the dead, and his promise of eternal life for those who trust in him – I say, is that story *true*? Did these things really happen? Or is this one more tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing? I’m sure most of us are convinced that the good news is true, absolutely true. But we cannot be reminded often enough many reasons and what good reasons we have to believe the gospel true!

### **Text Comment**

- v.2 Paul says straightaway that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after his crucifixion lies at the bedrock of the Christian faith and gospel. Our faith cannot exist without that historical fact.
- v.3 With these words Paul emphasizes that what he taught the Corinthians he did not dream up himself; it is what all Christians believe.
- v.4 The twice repeated “according to the Scriptures” means that the events of Christ’s passion and resurrection were the fulfillment of the divine plan as revealed in the Scriptures. These events did not “overtake” the Lord Jesus, so to speak. They were the purpose of his coming into the world and had been predicted long before.  
  
“That he was buried” indicates the reality of Christ’s death and so prepares for the reality of Christ’s resurrection; that is, there was a real body in a real tomb Friday afternoon and that same tomb was really empty on Sunday morning. He was raised, and now Paul goes on to say that he was also seen, and not by one or two people only, but by many. The appearance to Peter on Easter Sunday is otherwise mentioned only briefly in Luke’s account (24:34). It is wonderful to think of the Lord seeking Peter out alone to reassure him of his love for Peter after the apostle’s cowardly betrayal of the Lord a few nights before.
- v.6 The obvious point of mentioning the fact that many of the eyewitnesses of the Lord’s resurrection were still alive is that there were plenty of people at that time who could confirm the truth of what Paul was saying and what Christians believe. The New Testament makes a great deal, as you know, of the fact that its report of the stupendous events that make up the message of the gospel was confirmed by many eyewitnesses.

- v.8 Interestingly, Paul does not mention the Lord's appearances to the women on the day of his resurrection which figure prominently in the Gospel accounts. This list given here is apparently the more "official" list of witnesses. This means the number of witnesses was actually larger, perhaps much larger.

It has sometimes been asked why the risen Christ appeared only to his disciples. So far as we know he appeared to no unbeliever. *First*, the Lord told the unbelievers who rejected him that he would not appear to them again until he came in judgment. That they did not see the risen Lord was punishment for their unbelief. *Second*, the Lord had said that even if someone came back from the dead that generation would not believe in him. The issue of faith is never decided by the quality of evidence but by the condition of a man or woman's heart. *Third*, his appearing only to his disciples also left room for the role of witnesses, by which he had determined that the gospel would spread and would continue to spread as it spreads today - by Christians bearing witness to what happened long ago. *Fourth*, we might also add that if the resurrection were a pious fiction, we would expect precisely accounts of such post-resurrection appearances to Pilate and the Sanhedrin and, perhaps to Caesar himself, just the sort of appearances that are described in the apocryphal gospels that were written later. Myths and legends tend to be written the same way. This is no myth and it was not written like any myth which has come down to us from ancient times. It has all the marks of actual history and not least in those features we would never expect if someone in that day and time were concocting a story, especially the prominence of women in the account of the resurrection and the limited circle of witnesses.

Note that Paul clearly regards his experience on the Damascus road as an *appearance* of the Lord, just as he appeared to the others. It was *not* a vision, it was an encounter.

There are many lines of evidence that support the claim made by Christians from the very beginning that in the good news we are dealing with facts, facts of history in the ordinary sense of the word. Astonishing as the claims Christians make about Jesus of Nazareth may be, astonishing as they knew those claims seemed to others, they were unembarrassed to tell others what Christ had said and what he had done *because they knew these things*. As Paul said to the Roman governor Festus, "What I am saying is true and reasonable." Of course, it was only reasonable because it *was* true! [Acts 26:24-25] Peter was speaking for all Christians of the first generation when he wrote in his second letter:

"We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." [1:16]

We read in the Gospels how unprepared they were for the things they had seen and heard. They were, as first century Jews, never expecting the Messiah to be such a person as Jesus of Nazareth or to suffer, die, and rise again as he did. But they had seen it with their own eyes. They were proclaiming what they knew had happened and their conviction transformed the world.

Think about this for a moment. Many today believe that human life is a biological accident, the product of natural processes extended over immense periods of time. The theory of evolution is, in their minds, an *accomplished historical fact*. But is it? We have multitudes of fish fossils and multitudes of amphibian fossils. What we don't have are the fossils of those intermediate creatures partly fish and partly amphibian that the theory requires to have existed in immense numbers because the changes that produced an amphibian from a fish were so small that they had to accumulate through thousands of generations. Similarly, we have many reptile fossils and large numbers of bird fossils. But what we don't have are the fossils that demonstrate that there were untold multitudes of creatures – partly reptile and partly bird – that bridged the gap, the immense gap, between reptiles and feathered flying birds. And the intermediates are missing everywhere in the so-called tree of life. This is no longer a secret as it was for two generations; it has become highly controversial within the evolutionary community. Now if one wishes to claim that the evolutionary story of life is true, this lack of intermediates in the fossil record is an obvious problem, a serious problem, many would say a fatal problem. The most that one could fairly say, I would think, is that he hopes that this problem might somehow be solved. He thinks evolution is an attractive theory, he is inclined to believe it is the story of life in this world but, at present, he must acknowledge that the fossil record is disconfirming, not confirming evidence. Not to put too fine a point on it, if those intermediate fossils existed, like all the other fossils do, *everyone would believe in evolution*. The proof of it would lie face up in the history of life recorded in the rocks. The reason why there are so many skeptics is precisely because the evidence of transitional forms is conspicuously missing. The fossils that would prove evolution true are the very fossils that are missing.

Or, consider the problem posed by the bio-chemical revolution of the past generation in the life sciences. The fantastic complexity of even the simplest living cell is now understood in a way it never was when the theory of evolution was first widely proposed and widely embraced. The unbelievably immense amounts of information stored and then used by the cell is a marvel of biological engineering, far transcending any such system human beings have been able to develop for ourselves. No one knows how such a complicated organism as the living cell could have come into existence by accident. And nature is chock full of such fantastically complex structures and bio-chemical engines. Someone who wants to claim that evolution is the story of the history of life could, I should think, say that he hopes that at some point this problem might be solved. It certainly hasn't yet been solved. Indeed, the problem has worsened with every new development.

Or, consider the origin of life itself. Origin of life research has largely ground to a halt as the gap between chemistry and the cell has grown larger rather than smaller over the past several generations of research. There is today no remotely persuasive explanation of how life did or might have begun. So someone who believes that unguided evolution is the whole story of living things can certainly say that, despite these punishing problems, there *may be* some solution to be found sometime in the future to rescue the theory; that evolution might turn out to be true, but, at present, no one can say that it is true because no one has seen evolution take place – by which I mean the transition between fish and amphibians or between reptiles and birds or between some sort of hominid and modern humans – and no one can explain how such unbelievably complex adaptations as even the most primitive life or flight or human speech might have originated by accident.

How different the good news! People *saw with their own eyes* these fabulous things take place. They *saw* the miracles; they were astonished and dumbstruck by the power wielded by Jesus Christ. They *saw* him suffer and die on the cross and they *saw* him alive again the following Sunday. They *heard* him explain who he was and why he had done what he did. They *saw* him ascend to heaven and they *heard* him promise to return in due time. No missing fossils here; rather the same facts, the same events witnessed by hundreds if not thousands of people.

Take note of Paul's confident appeal here to first-hand, eyewitness testimony. The writers of the New Testament knew very well how difficult it would be for people to believe the story they told. They knew as well as we know today what was easy to believe and what was difficult. Time and again they appealed to first-hand testimony to confirm the truth of the amazing story they were proclaiming to the world. Over and again in the New Testament we hear their confident assertion: "We are witnesses of these things..." And, of course, they had to make their case in a decidedly hostile atmosphere. They were surrounded by people who had a stake in proving them wrong. The disciples could not afford to risk fables that would be at once exposed by their enemies. And so again and again we find them appealing to the knowledge *of their hearers*: "We are witnesses of these things," they say, "*as you yourselves know.*" (Acts 2:22) There is a reason, for example, why when refereed debates are waged before professional judges on whether the resurrection actually occurred the Christians usually win! The skeptic can say that he doesn't believe it because he's never seen it and because it would have been an absolutely unique event in history. But the people who witnessed it struggled to believe it themselves precisely because it was unprecedented, but their skepticism was overcome by the evidence of their own eyes.

In a way utterly unlike the other religions of the world and the other philosophies of human life, the Bible roots its message in space-time history, in marvelous events that took place in specific places, at specific times, and that were witnessed by specific people. Islam, for example, is not this way. It does not expose itself to historical examination as Christianity does. As Muslims are careful to say, the Koran was Mohammed's only miracle. And that miracle, as they further claim, can only be understood and appreciated, is accessible only to sophisticates who can read the Koran in Arabic. Christianity, on the other hand, confidently invites everyone to consider its assertion that certain events occurred in human history upon which the salvation of the world depends, an invitation addressed in any and every human language.

It is no accident that actual history, the written record of events, begins in the Middle East and is known to us there and there only for the ancient times in which the biblical history takes place. In other parts of the world there is nothing like what we have as a record of the history of say the 3000 years before Christ in the Middle East. There is no such written record of that period in South or North America, in northern Europe or sub-Saharan Africa. But, the events that unfold in the biblical history are related in terms of the rise and fall of civilizations, of the reigns of specific kings, of wars and earthquakes that are mentioned both in the Bible and in the other records of the time.

And so it is throughout the NT. The two great foci of salvation history are the birth of Jesus Christ and his passion and resurrection. Both of them are very carefully situated by the biblical narrative in the history of the world. We know who the emperor was when Jesus was born, who

the Judean king was, who the Roman governor was. It was a Roman census that resulted in Mary and Joseph's trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We know the names of a number of people who figure in the history of Christ's birth. Then we know in what years of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch of Galilee. No governor of Syria is named but we know from the Roman historian Tacitus that Tiberius kept the designated governor of Syria, Aelius Lamia, in Rome because he mistrusted him.

We know who the Roman governor was and who the emperor was when Jesus was crucified. We know the time of year by the Jewish reckoning. The history is recounted in terms entirely faithful to the political circumstances as we know them to have existed in Judea in those days. And, of course, we know the names and something of the lives of a good many people who were eyewitnesses of both the Lord's crucifixion and his resurrection.

There can be absolutely no question that the Bible intends us to understand that the central events of salvation history *happened* in the ordinary sense of the term, however wonderful those events may have been. They happened on a day like this day, in a place and a time about which we know many things, when people we know about were active in the world. In other words, in the Bible *religious truth* is the same sort of truth with which people operate in the everyday lives.

But there is more to the evidence for the good news than simply a supremely sober account of history backed-up by manifest and significant measures of eyewitness testimony. Twice Paul mentions that something happened "according to the Scriptures." Paul is saying that long before Jesus appeared in the world, long before he was born or his ministry began, it was all described by the prophets. This is a firmer argument for the historicity of the good news than you might think. Some of course will say that the fulfillment of prophecy is in the eye of the beholder. That is, you could read those ancient prophecies to be predictions of what occurred in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, but you could just as well read them in an entirely different way. But is that true? Not really. These OT passages are, alas, interpreted in an entirely different way by those who do not wish to embrace the good news. But they have set for themselves a demanding task. There was too much in the event that corresponded to the predictions beforehand: whether a man of David's line, who would be God himself; the suffering servant who would bear the sins of his people and so justify them before God; the circumstances of his birth in Bethlehem; but, at the same time and contrary to all expectation, the prominence of Galilee in the Messiah's ministry; his role as prophet, priest, and king; his coming to be the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. There was nothing of this in the expectation of first century Judaism. But there it is in the ancient Scriptures. I know a man, a Jewish psychiatrist, who became a Christian at the moment he realized that Isaiah 53 had been written 700 years before the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now think of that death prophesied long before. Christ's death, unlike the death of any other great human leader, *is celebrated by his followers!* It wasn't the end of his life; it wasn't the tragic and untimely termination of a career that still held so much unfulfilled promise. His death was the purpose for which he came into the world; his death was the way he fulfilled the promise of his life; his death was what liberated the world from the bondage of sin. Of the death of no other human being has such a thing ever been said or believed.

Paul had already told these same Corinthians, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified.*” [2:2] The four Gospels concentrate on the events leading up to it and then on his death on the cross, devoting much more space to this than to the rest of his life. There is something about the cross that is undeniable, both as a fact and as a message. It conveys a terrible and wonderful power even from the great distance of now some 2,000 years. There is nothing like this in any religious myth, nothing so concrete, nothing so obviously suited to the human problem. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” In ways we scarcely can calculate the cross has changed the thinking of the world! Listen to this from Malcolm Muggeridge, before he was a believer.

“I would catch a glimpse of a cross, not necessarily a crucifix; maybe two pieces of wood accidentally nailed together, on a telegraph pole, for instance – and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however admirable they might be.... This symbol, which was considered to be derisory in my home [something to laugh at he means. Muggeridge was raised in a Marxist home; his parents had no time whatsoever for Christianity.] was yet also the focus of inconceivable hopes and desires.... As I remember this, a sense of my own failure lies leadenly upon me. I should have worn it over my heart, carried it, a precious standard never to be wrested out of my hands.... It should have been my cult, my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can’t say I didn’t know. I knew from the beginning and turned away.” [*Jesus Rediscovered*, 24-25]

Only one thing can explain why such a repulsive instrument of torture and humiliation could gain such wonderful power, could bring hope to such vast multitudes of human beings: a particular death on a particular cross for a particular purpose by a particular person! It is the cross that gave the good news such credibility, that and the resurrection. In a world of pain, the only God we can trust with our lives is a God who is not immune from pain himself, but has shared our pain because he loves us. As John Stott beautifully put this:

“In the course of my travels I have entered a number of Buddhist temples in different Asian countries. I have stood respectfully before a statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, serene and silent, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. The crucified God is the one for me!  
[*Why I Am a Christian*, 63]

But, what is more, the honest heart knows that no one invented *this* story. Only the mighty event itself could have produced this message, this power to heal and to console and to save.

Think of Paul himself, who wrote the words we read this morning. No one has ever offered a convincing explanation for the life and experience of Paul except Paul himself. No serious

historian of that period doubts the historicity of Paul or his ministry or the message of his letters. No one doubts that there was a remarkable, tremendous transformation; that the rabid persecutor of Christians – the agent of an ancient *Gestapo* – became their champion or that Paul himself explained the change as a result of his having encountered the risen Christ himself. Is there a plausible alternative explanation? Has one ever been concocted? As the German NT scholar, W.G. Kummel observed, given the inadequacies of the other alternative explanations “we must take Paul’s [own] statements seriously.” [Cited in Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, 144n]

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a bright young man named George Lyttelton. A graduate first of Eton and then of Cambridge, he eventually made a life for himself in politics. At one point he became the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the British equivalent of our Secretary of the Treasury. He was later made a Baron and so is referred to in English history as Lord Lyttelton. He was also a poet and writer of some note. In fact, he warrants a short biography in Samuel Johnson’s, *Lives of the English Poets*.

Lyttelton was the son of a devout Christian father, but as a young man, educated in the rationalism of his day, running with the friends he ran with, he became doubtful of the truth of Christianity. However, at age 38 he set out to examine the evidence for the Christian faith and did so largely by examining the evidence for the conversion of the Apostle Paul. The result of his examination was not only that he became a convinced Christian, but that he wrote a book, published in 1747, entitled, *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul*. Lyttelton concluded that “the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation.” [Cited in Bruce, 75] In Samuel Johnson’s brief biography of Lyttelton he writes that the book was “a treatise to which infidelity has never been able to fabricate [a plausible] answer.” Among many other arguments, Lyttelton concluded that Saul’s own nature and his upbringing could no more produce the Christian Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, than charcoal could produce snow or a river carry a boat upstream against its own current.

You know only too well that I could go and on in this vein. We have every reason to be *sure* that the good news is not some story invented to teach some religious *idea*. It is an account of things that actually happened. Wonderful things! Stupendous things! Events that fundamentally define the meaning of human life and its possibilities. It is, alas, true that human beings everywhere and in immense numbers refuse to believe the truth, the truth about many things touching their lives, their own persons – the God who exists, the world that he made. Whether motivated by pride, or fear, or pleasure or convenience, they prefer to believe what is not true. We know that. But we also know that when we are talking about the gospel, the good news, we’re talking not about theories; certainly not about inventions or myths. We are talking about the mighty facts of history!