CHRIST WAS RAISED ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

1 Corinthians 15:1-58

Key Verses: 15:3-4

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures....”

We are almost at the end of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Paul began his letter by bringing them back to the cross of Jesus. Paul ends his letter by reminding them of the resurrection of Christ. These two pillars of the Christian faith: the death of Christ on the cross, and the resurrection of Christ, are like bookends of Paul’s long letter. The resurrection is recorded in all four gospels. However, the gospel accounts are mostly the facts of the event. In this passage, Paul explains the meaning of the resurrection most profoundly and completely. There is power and glory in the resurrection that can transform our lives and enable us to live victoriously in the world. It is a true hope, worthy of our life investment.

There is a cycle of life in this world. We are born as little babies, grow up, marry, have children, watch them marry, welcome our grandchildren, and die. It seems that death is the end of everything. This is the agony of human beings. This is why people despair. We need eternal life and eternal hope. How can we have this? It is through the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Especially, the resurrection is important. Without resurrection, the cross has no meaning. So Paul reminded the Corinthians of the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Resurrection faith solves our problems fundamentally. Let’s accept resurrection faith in our hearts through this message.

I.  The gospel of the resurrection (1-11)

In verses 1-11 Paul teaches them the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead. For this purpose he teaches the essence of the gospel and introduces witnesses of the gospel. Verses 1-4 are the contents of the gospel and verses 5-11 are the witnesses of the resurrection.

First, the contents of the gospel. Look at verse 1. “Now brothers I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.” Why did he remind them of the gospel? It was because they were losing their gospel faith as time passed by. When they first heard the gospel through Paul, they accepted it with great joy, confessing their sins, standing firm in their faith. But as time passed by, their faith became weak because they were impatient, and they entertained false ideas and received bad cultural influences such as sexual immorality. They began to drift with the strong current of the times. So Paul reminded them of the gospel, which they had received and on which they had taken their stand. Look at verse 2. “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.” Salvation comes when whe hold on to the gospel truth which we received. Otherwise, we have believed in vain.

Then what are the contents of the gospel? Look at verses 3-4. “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures....” The gospel is not a man-made story. It was not created by Paul or by the scheme of clever men. The gospel is from God. God promised to send his one and only Son into the world as our Savior and God kept this promise through Jesus Christ. God has called people to be part of his redemption story, but it has always been his story. Paul received it and passed it on to the Corinthian believers. The gospel has been passed on down through the generations and has come to us. The gospel is the most important thing in our lives. When we consider the gospel as of first importance and hold firmly to it, we are saved.

In the gospel there are two main elements: the cross and the resurrection. Look at verse 3b. “...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures....” What is man’s fundamental problem? Nowadays, energy resources are an important consideration for all people as the price of gasoline has skyrocketed. Many feel that it is most urgent to develop new sources of energy to be independent from oil producing countries. But the Bible says that the most important issue for mankind is man’s sin problem. Sin is not merely a moral issue. Sin is a spiritual problem. Sin, “hamartia” in Greek, means to separate or to cut. Sin cuts man’s relationship with God. Sin is rebellion against God and disobedience to the word of God. Sin is not accepting God as God, nor glorifying God, giving thanks to him (Ro 1:21). Sin is pride—trying to live without God. Because of sin, man loses the glorious image of God and degenerates to the level of animals. Sin brings destruction to man’s body and soul. The consequences of sin are very serious. Many people think sin is enjoyable, but it is fatal. Sin destroys man’s character, family and society. Sin makes us experience guilt and shame. People are tormented by sin day and night like the Gerasene demoniac. In the end man dies because the wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23a). People think that death is the end of life. But that is not true. Hebrews 9:27 says, “...just as man is destined to die once and after that face judgment....” No one can escape God’s judgment (2 Cor 5:10). No one can endure God’s judgment. Revelation 21:8 says, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfer. This is the second death.” In hell, men suffer endlessly without any hope for deliverance. Sin produces terrible consequences. Because of sin we die, face judgment and go to eternal punishment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. It is so horrible that we don’t want to think about it. But it is true.

Mankind could not solve this problem at all. But God solved this problem for us. Verse 3 says that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. Christ shed his precious blood on the cross to pay off the demand of sin. We should have died and gone to hell, but Christ died for our sins and forgave all of our sins. Christ freed us from the consequences of sin and gave us eternal life and the kingdom of God.

If the story ended with Christ’s death, it could be another poignant yet sorrowful tragedy, like Shakespeae’s plays. Since death came into the world through Adam’s sin, death has ruled over every man. No one has overcome death. If Jesus’ story ended in death, we would still be under the power of death. Look at verse 4. “that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures....” Christ rose from the dead. Christ defeated the power of death through his resurrection. Jesus’ death was not an ordinary death. Jesus, the Son of God, was sinless and perfect. Yet he died bearing the sins of the world in his body. Then God raised him from the dead, proving that his sacrifice was acceptable to God, and that through Christ our sins are forgiven.

There have been a handful of people who have been raised from the dead, including Lazarus. However, Jesus’ resurrection is different. Though Lazarus was raised, he had to die again. Also, his resurrection has nothing to do with other men’s resurrection. But Jesus’ resurrection is God’s triumph over death for all men. Romans 6:9 says, “For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead he cannot die again. Death no longer has mastery over him.” Christ triumphed over the power of death. Through his resurrection he freed us from the power of death and gives us eternal life. Christ’s resurrection gives us assurance that our sins are forgiven and guarantees us the final victory over the power of death. Christ’s resurrection gives us a living hope in the kingdom of God. So Paul emphasized the fact that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures.

The words “according to the Scriptures,” are important. This did not happen by chance. It was long ago planned by God and fufilled by God. The Scriptures have a long historical background. They have stood the test of time as the most reliable witness of the truth. The truth that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day are reliable facts of history which fulfill the promise of God in the Scriptures.

Second, witnesses of the resurrection (5-11). Paul mentions witnesses of the resurrection to prove that Christ rose from the dead. First, the Risen Christ appeared to the Apostle Peter. Later the Risen Christ appeared to the Twelve when they were hiding in an upstairs room. The Risen Christ showed himself to doubting Thomas and let him put his fingers in the nail marks of his hands and his hand into the wound on his side. Even Thomas was convinced that it was really Christ. The Risen Christ appeared to more than 500 at the same time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote his letter. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles and last of all to Paul also, as to one abnormally born. These men all became witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. This changed them fundamentally from fearful to courageous, from selfish to sacrificial, from self-centered to God-centered. Among them, Peter and Paul are the best two examples.

Although Peter loved Jesus, he made many mistakes and had many weaknesses. Most critically, he denied Jesus three times during Jesus’ passion. Jesus knew Peter’s weaknesses well. Still, Jesus appeared to Peter first after he had risen. Peter was changed by meeting the Risen Christ. He became a courageous man of God who became the rock foundation of Jesus’ church. Paul was the one who persecuted the church of Christ the most. He was a main figure at the stoning of St. Stephen. Then, on his way to Damascus to arrest the believers, he met the Risen Christ. Suddenly a bright light shone around him and he heard the Risen Christ speak, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Ac 9:5) Through this he was born again and became a witness of Christ’s resurrection. Paul did not receive training from Christ personally while he was on earth. But he claimed to be an apostle based on his meeting with the Risen Christ. He saw the Risen Christ in the light and heard his voice speaking to him. So he became an apostle. In the past Paul had been very proud. But after meeting the Risen Christ, he became very humble, the least of all. He remembered what kind of person he had been and how Christ had been gracious to him. To maintain God’s grace he worked hard, harder than all the others to preach the death and resurrection of Christ.

Peter and Paul are witnesses of Christ’s resurrection. Paul’s life is clear evidence that Christ has risen. No one could change Paul’s life. Only the resurrection of Christ could change him and give him new life. Paul and the other witnesses preached the resurrection of Christ. Through their preaching the Corinthian believers could hear the message and believe. When we hear and believe we can meet Risen Christ and become resurrection witnesses.

II.  The power of the resurrection (12-34)

Look at verse 12. “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” There were some Christians in Corinth who did not believe the resurrection of the dead. They did not deny the resurrection of Christ, but they denied the resurrection of other believers from the dead. We can understand why when we look at the cultural background of the times. In the church of Corinth there were Jews and Greeks. Among the Jews there were Sadducees who denied the resurrection. They denied life after death and the resurrection body and the soul. Greeks believed in the eternity of man’s soul. But they could not think about the resurrection of the body. They had a philosophy of dualism. They believed the invisible world of soul and spirit was good, but the visible world of matter was evil. They thought man’s body was evil since it was part of the material world. They thought of the body as a terrible prison house of the soul which could never be sanctified. They wanted to destroy their bodies so that their souls could be completely free. Under the influence of such a philosophy, they could not believe in the resurrection of the body. Moreover, they thought that Christ’s resurrection had nothing to do with their own resurrection. In this part Paul explains the relationship of Christ’s resurrection to the resurrection of all believers by stating the necessity of the resurrection (12-19), the power of the resurrection (20-28), and the practical effect of resurrection faith in the life of believers (29-34).

First, the necessity of the resurrection. In verses 12-19 Paul assumes for the sake of agrument that there is no resurrection of the dead. What would the implication of this be? If there were no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ had been raised (13). Then our preaching is useless and so is our faith (14). We preach that Christ rose again to become our Lord and Savior. If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is nonsense. Even worse, it is false testimony about God (15). We preach that God rasied Christ from the dead. If there is no resurrection, God did not raise Christ from the dead. Then God is not the Almighty God we preach, but a weak God, even a dead God. But God raised Christ from the dead and proved that he is living, Almighty God.

Again, if Christ has not been raised, we are still in our sins (17). The wages of sin is death. If the death problem has not been solved, the sin problem also has not been solved. If there is no resurrection from the dead, those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost (18), and Christians are to be pitied more than all men (19). Many believers sacrificed everything to participate in the suffering of Christ. Some even became martyrs. But if there is no resurrection, then all is lost and believers are the most foolish people on earth. Most people want to live a little more comfortably. They do their best to obtain bits and pieces of pleasure in this world. But Christians sacrifice everything. We have no time to enjoy life like worldly people do, because we serve others with the gospel. If there is no resurrection, sacrificial Christians are the most miserable persons in the world. They are deceived by a false hope and lose everything. If the dead are not raised at all, then Christ has not been raised, and the whole foundation of Christianity crumbles to nothing. So Christians must believe the resurrection of the dead.

Second, the power of the resurrection (20-28). Look at verse 20. “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Christ’s resurrection is a fact, an event that happened in history. It is connected to the resurrection of believers. To explain this, Paul calls Christ the “firstfruits.” The Israelites offered their firstfruits to God to acknowledge that all fruits belonged to God and to thank God. The firstfruits were a sign of many more fruits to come. In the same way the resurrection of Christ is a sign of the resurrection of all believers. Jesus’ resurrection is the firstfruit. It gives us great hope that we will be raised like Jesus in God’s time.

Some people may wonder how they can be assured of their resurrection based on one person’s resurrection. Paul answered that the resurrection of all people comes through the resurrection of one man just as death came to all men through one man. Look at verse 21. “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” Sin came into the world through one man Adam. Death came into the world because the wages of sin is death. When we are in Adam we are ruled by the power of sin. We did not commit Adam’s sin, yet we are ruled by Adam’s sin. But in Christ we are set free. Look at verse 22. “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” In Christ we are freed from the power of sin and death. Christ rules us with life-giving power and will resurrect us in glory when he comes again. Look at verse 23. “But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”

The power of Christ’s resurrection is not limited to giving life to believers. It also brings an amazing change to the whole universe. Let’s read verse 24. “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” Jesus’ resurrection destroys all the power of darkness and restores God’s righteous reign in life and peace to the whole creation. After Jesus has subjected everything, he will submit to God and God will be all in all (28). Since the Fall, men and nature have been groaning inwardly. But when Christ subjects everything, God becomes all in all. Then believers will rule together with Christ and the new heaven and new earth will come. Perfect paradise is restored through the new world that comes.

Third, practical resurrection faith (29-34). In these verses Paul teaches what kind of life we should live. Our lifestyle must be consistent with our faith in the resurrection of the dead. In Corinth at that time, some people were baptized for the dead (29). Paul does not comment on the practice itself, but it revealed the resurrection faith of those who did it. Believers should be willing to go through all manner of hardship because they have resurrection faith. Paul said, “I die every day” (31). In order to follow Jesus and grow in Jesus, Paul died to himself every day. He died to his desire to live a comfortable life. He denied his desire for worldly recognition and honor from men. Paul was an outstanding scholar. He could have gained worldwide fame as an intellectual. But for the sake of Christ, he gave it all up. He considered everything a loss for the sake of gaining Christ. He died every day to live sacrificially to serve others. How could he do so? By resurrection faith.

On the other hand, those without resurrection faith become pleasure seeking. Paul said their motto is, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (33). This motto may have come from the gladiators of the time. In Corinth there was a gladiator arena. Gladiators did not know when they would die in combat with other men or with wild animals. They had no hope other than eating and drinking well before they inevitably died. Ecclesiastes 2:24a says, “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction.” If life on earth is the end, we will naturally seek pleasure as much as possible. But Paul was willing to fight the enemies of the gospel, though it was like fighting wild beasts. Paul gave his life for Jesus and the gospel because he had hope in the resurrection of the dead. Paul sacrificed temporary pleasure for eternal benefits and goodness. He encouraged the Corinthian believers, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning....” Those who sin are ignorant of God. We must come back to our senses and stop sinning. We must live by resurrection faith and die every day to serve God’s work sacrificially.

III.  The glory of the resurrection (35-49)

Thus far, Paul has testified about the resurrection of  the dead. Some of the Corinthians had a question about how the dead are raised, and with what kind of body they would come. As we see every day on the news, some people’s bodies are crushed in accidents and others’ are mangled in war. Some people are cremated at death. So people ask, “How are the dead rasied?” Paul explains based on the story of a seed and plant.

First, what we sow does not come to life unless it dies. It is natural law that a seed must die to come to life. Only when it dies can it produce many seeds. Our body should die to receive a new resurrection body.

Second, we do not plant the body that will be but just a seed. God gives it a body. To each seed he gives its own body. If we sow an apple seed, an apple tree will grow. The body is different than the seed. However the character of the tree is the same as the seed. When we are raised we will be the same people but with glorified bodies.

Third, there are many kinds of bodies. Animals, men, birds and fish all have different bodies. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies. God gave some animals four feet to walk on earth. God gave birds wings to fly, fish fins to swim and do on. Physical bodies are for life on earth. Spiritual bodies are for heaven. Look at verses 42-44. “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” Paul saw the natural body as perishable, dishonorable, and weak. All people perish without exception. Even Miss USA and Miss World have bodies that will perish. Someday maggots will eat their bodies. Our bodies are also dishonorable. We all want to live a glorious life. But we are full of mistakes and weaknesses. Our regrets grow as we get older. Finally, all people become dishonorable. Our bodies are weak. Some people look strong. But if they get the flu they become powerless. Also we suffer from constant temptation from our sinful desires. How then can this kind of body be changed? It is sown perishable, raised imperishable; sown in dishonor, raised in glory; sown in weakness, raised in power; sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body. Our bodies will be changed to be suitable to our lives in the kingdom of God. We will be like Jesus when we are raised from the dead. Wow! We will be like Jesus. How? Jesus became a life-giving spirit. We are born of the dust, born in the likeness of the earthly man. But at the resurrection we will bear the likeness of Christ. We will live eternally with him. We will know Jesus perfectly as he knows us completely. Resurrection of the dead is glorious, and we should desire it most.

IV. Ultimate victory (50-58)

So far Paul talked about the glory of resurrection. Now he sings a song of ultimate victory. First he tells a mystery of the last day. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. To inherit the kingdom of God, we must be changed. Paul said, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (51-52). The last day is a day of judgment for the enemies of God, but it is a day of salvation for all believers. Suddenly at the sound of the trumpet we will be changed. We will all be caught up in heaven and meet the Lord. This is a secret that all believers must hold in our hearts. When believers participate in this glorious resurrecition, the power of death is destroyed. Then the saying that is written will come true: Death has been swallowed up in victory. So far death ruled as king. Every man died by the sting of death. No one wanted to die. Everyone wanted to live and did everything possible to avoid death. But all men died without exception. They suffered from meaninglessness, mercilessness, fear and much more. They suffered from guilt due to law. But at that time of resurrection the power of death will lose its power completely. The power of sin and law will also lose their power completely. Paul shouted because the victory was so great. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (55) Look at verses 56-57. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God gave us the victory. We all want victorious life. But unless we overcome the power of death, there is no victory. Only Jesus, who destroyed the power of death can help us live a victorious life.

Paul testifed about the assurance of resurrection glory and hope for all believers. Now he encourages them to stand firm and work hard for the Lord. Look at vers 58. “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” There are many good things in the world. So it is easy for us not to lose our faith in the gospel. It is easy to pursue perishable things, being deceived by the world. But it is not easy to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. We must know that the world and its desires will pass away. Only the work of the Lord remains forever. The Risen Christ will reward believers, whatever they do for him, 100 times. Whatever we offer to Christ is not lost, but saved in the most secure place. So we pray that we may give our heart all the more to the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor in the lord is not in vain.