

JESUS IS THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

As we continue our journey through the Apostles' Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **1 Corinthians 15:1-8**.

Whether it elicits a cheer or a groan from you, **football season is here again**. It's gotten more sophisticated across the years. Playbooks three inches deep. Fancy offenses marked by no huddle, tempo, motion, misdirection, RPO. Defense is more sophisticated: nickel backs, stunts, blitzes, man to man, zone, cover 2. Some of you know what I'm talking about. It's a bunch of gobbledy-gook to the rest of you. That's okay. Because despite football's growing nuances and sophistication, it still comes down to the basics: blocking, tackling, running, passing, kicking. That's it. That's the heart of football.

The clauses of the creed on which we focus today are the heart of the gospel. The Christian faith has many doctrines: theology, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and more. But whether you can make heads or tails out of some of that, it all gets back to the basics, to the heart of the gospel. Here's the way the Apostles' Creed states it: *"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord who ... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again."* The heart of the gospel: Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ rose from the dead—that's the blocking and tackling, the running and passing and kicking of the gospel.

And that's what Paul communicates to the Corinthian church and to us in our text today: the heart of the gospel. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

Paul wrote this letter to discuss several topics with the church at Corinth. They were something of a mess.

- There was division among the brothers and sisters, giving preference to certain leaders and choosing sides: *“I belong to Paul.” “But I belong to Apollos.” “I belong to Cephas.” “You’re all a bunch of chumps: I belong to Christ”* (1:12). Division.
- There was public sin in the camp: a man sleeping with his father’s wife (5:1)—which is enough to make a pagan blush.
- They were taking each other to court (1 Cor 6).
- They had questions about marriage and sex (1 Cor 7).
- They wondered if it was okay to eat food that had been offered to idols (1 Cor 8).
- They were confused about worship, the Lord’s Supper, and spiritual gifts: *“My gift’s better than your gift.” “I speak in tongues, and you don’t”* (1 Cor 11-14).

You think you’ve been a part of **messy church**, that church has nothing on First Church, Corinth—divided, confused, obvious sin, arrogance. Paul writes into all these issues. And as he nears the end of his letter and deals with their questions about the resurrection, he takes a moment to remind them of the heart of the gospel.

Look at **vv. 1-2** ...

Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Neither your favorite preacher nor your views on spiritual gifts can save you. **Only the gospel saves you.** More technically, “is saving you.” True salvation lasts for the long haul. We’ve all known folks who got excited about the gospel, jumped in with both feet, but when troubles came along or when shiny things of the world stole their attention and their hearts, they bailed on the gospel, on Jesus, and on the church. Where are they now? They are on church roles but not in church pews and not in kingdom fields giving their lives away for the sake of the gospel. They are

gone. These are the people Paul is referring to when he writes of the gospel *“by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”* If you bail on the gospel, the gospel never had you in the first place. It was a phase, an attempt to fix something in your life, an emotional response to a camp meeting or a stirring sermon, a favor to a parent, a spouse, or a friend. But your heart was never in it. Time tells these things. Do you persevere in the gospel, *“hold to the message”*—or did you believe in vain and leave the gospel behind?

That’s a **question** worth asking yourself now and then. Am I holding to the message? Am I faithful to Jesus? Am I involved in the church? Unless you believe and continue to believe, the gospel is only information not transformation. *“Check your heart,”* says Paul.

And **remember the gospel**: *“For I passed on to you as most important what I also received.”* Paul did not invent a new gospel, an improved gospel, gospel 2.0, a gospel designed just for the church in Corinth. Paul passed on the only gospel there is—the gospel handed down by Jesus, the gospel Paul received, the gospel that saved him, and the only gospel that can save you and me.

He passes on the gospel again in vv. 3-8.

II

Notice the first phrase: *“That Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture.”* Christ didn’t die for his own sins. He didn’t have any. Though tempted in every way just like we are, he never sinned (Heb 4:15). So he could take our sins on himself on the cross. And that’s what he did. In some mysterious transaction, God took our sins and put them on Jesus. *All* of our sins: our pride, our lies, our selfishness, our lusts, our arrogance, our meanness, our disobedience, our unforgiveness, our thefts, our murders, our coveting and envying. Christ died for *all* of our sins.

In his second letter to Corinth (5:21), Paul writes that God *“made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.”* Christ **became sin** on the

cross. As someone pointed out, Christ became every murderer, molester, thief, miser, harlot, tyrant, deviant, abuser, oppressor, racist, materialist, atheist, egomaniac that ever existed. No wonder Jesus cried out from the cross, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”* He who knew no sin felt the guilt and shame of all sin for all time. My sin would have been enough to make him cry, but in the scope of history my sins, your sins, are but a speck on the back of a mite on the back of a flea. Imagine all sins of all time pressed upon him ... because he bore them all. Listen to 1 John 2:2, Jesus *“himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.”* He bore our sin. He *became* our sin. And he felt the burning wrath God must pour out on sin to satisfy his holiness and his love. Charles Spurgeon said it this way: *“At one triumphant draught of love, He drank damnation dry.”*¹ I can’t get my mind around such love and sacrifice. Christ died for our sins.

“According to the Scriptures.” The cross was no last-minute plan on the part of God. The prophets spoke of it long before the pre-existent Christ was *“conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”* Isaiah saw it clearly:

*But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.*

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, everyone, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (53:5-6, NKJV).*

The psalmist saw it too:

*Many bulls surround me;
strong ones of Bashan encircle me.
They open their mouths against me—
lions, mauling and roaring.*

¹From a sermon by Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Death of Christ,” in Warren Wiersbe, compiler, *Classic Sermons on the Cross of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 18.

*I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are disjointed;
my heart is like wax,
melting within me.
My strength is dried up like baked clay;
my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You put me into the dust of death.*

*For dogs have surrounded me;
a gang of evildoers has closed in on me;
they pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
people look and stare at me.
They divided my garments among themselves,
and they cast lots for my clothing (22:12-18).*

And as far back as **Genesis 3:15**, God himself warned the devil-serpent that despite humanity's fall into sin, God would remedy this problem in Christ: *"I will put hostility [that's Christ] between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."* Satan would get his licks in on Christ. He would stir up the Jewish religious leaders against Jesus, and he would stir up Pontius Pilate to sentence Jesus to death by crucifixion. Satan would get in his licks—he would bruise Jesus' *heel*. But Jesus would crush Satan's *head*—destroy him, vanquish him, and on the last day, consign him forever to hell.

The cross was God's plan to save the likes of us. If there had been **another way**, God would have found it. There was no other way. The cross was the only way. God planned it. God promised it. And God executed the plan in his sinless Son Jesus Christ. That's the first piece of the gospel: *"that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures."*

III

Paul then mentions the next piece of the gospel: "that he was buried." Here is a composite look at Jesus' burial in the gospels. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish ruling council

and a secret follower of Jesus, worked up his nerve and asked Pilate for Jesus' dead body. And with Pilate's permission, Joseph came and took the body. Nicodemus, another secret follower of Jesus, came along too, bringing the necessary spices to hastily prepare a body for burial before sundown and the Sabbath. So they anointed Jesus' body, wrapped him in strips of linen, and laid him out on a stone slab in a tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Mary Magdalene and some other women who were followers of Jesus marched in grim procession with Joseph and Nicodemus to the tomb. Satisfied that they had done all they could do for Jesus on such short notice, they backed out of the tomb, rolled a large stone across its entrance, wiped their hands, brushed off their clothes, and walked away in shock and sorrow.

Jesus' burial is **no minor detail** in the story. That's why the creed and our text specifically mention it. For one thing, Jesus' burial fulfills an Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 53:9 – "*He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death*" His burial is also significant because in that day and in Roman tradition, the bodies of criminals were often denied burial. The bodies of the two criminals crucified alongside Jesus were probably dumped in some pit.² No tending to the body. No anointing with spice. No burial wrap in linen. Just unceremoniously pitched into a pit like a couple of dead stray dogs. But not Jesus. He was buried.

It matters. It is a **clear signal** that Jesus *died* on the cross. You don't bury people who are still alive. Jesus was dead. God's plan required him to die. He died on the cross. Beaten half-to-death by a Roman flogging, Jesus was then stretched out on a cross—nails pounded into his hands and feet to pin him there. And as if that wasn't enough violence done to one body, at the end of the experience, a soldier rammed a spear into his chest to make sure Jesus was dead. And he was: as dead as the nails that held him to that cross. He did more than pass out or slip into a coma. He died.

The Centurion and his soldiers who'd presided over a hundred crucifixions knew dead when they saw it, and they **pronounced Jesus dead**. When they took Jesus' body off the cross, nobody

²Robert H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 254.

did CPR, nobody rushed him to the hospital, or carried him to a friend's house to tend his wounds. They did what you do with a dead man. They buried him. They buried him because he was dead.

That means Jesus lived a complete human life from the womb to the tomb. Jesus knows what it's like to die because he died. And was he ever **a trophy for Death**. Death brought down kings and pharaohs and Caesars, but the Son of God? No doubt Death would have liked to mount Jesus' head on the wall like an eight-point buck. Can you see Death on that Friday—puffed up with pride, reclining in his La-Z-Boy, lifting a glass of champagne in a toast to himself? *"I took down the Son of God. I did it! I am more powerful than God."* Death must have been feeling full on that dark Friday.

But did Jesus ever **burst his bubble**. The phrase in the creed that follows *"he was crucified, died, and was buried"* is this line: *"he descended to the dead."* The Scripture is foggy on this matter, and it's been an iffy line in the Creed across the years. Upon his death, did Jesus actually enter Hades, the place of the dead, and serve notice that Death's dominion was kaput?

Some scholars say, **"No**. *Jesus went directly to the same paradise that he promised the repentant criminal crucified next to him: 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise' (Lk 23:43). Jesus went to be with the Father to whom he prayed from the cross just before he died: 'Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit' (Lk 23:46). In the act of dying, he endured our hell and destroyed death. He did not descend into any realm of the dead. He didn't have to. His work was done. 'It is finished,' he said. So Jesus died and went straight to paradise."* This view has its proponents.

Other scholars say, **"Yes**, *Jesus descended to the dead. He didn't stay long, but Jesus barged into Hades like he owned the place, ripped the keys of death and Hades off Death's belt, jangled them in his face, and set Death's prisoners free."* It could be. Jesus says in Revelation 1:18, *"I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades."* Like Vikings plundered some coastal English village, Jesus plundered death. Charles Hill summarizes it this way:

Christ descended into Hades so that you and I would not have to. Christ descended to Hades so that we might ascend to heaven. Christ entered the realm of death, the realm of the strong enemy, and came away with his keys.³

This is an important piece of the gospel: Jesus was buried. Whether he actually descended into the place of the dead is not a crucial piece. This is the crucial piece: Jesus died, and in dying for our sins, he destroyed death.

IV

But he didn't stay dead! Drumroll, please: *"on the third day he rose again."* Paul says it this way in our text: *"that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."* Jesus got up from the grave. Can you imagine?

It's **early Sunday morning**. Women on their way to the tomb leaving footprints in the morning dew. They are not expecting resurrection. Those aren't balloons and a party cake in their hands; those are burial spices. There wasn't time on Friday to prepare Jesus' body for its eternal rest—just hastily applied spices and wrap till Sabbath was over. It's Sunday. Sabbath is over, so Mary Magdalene and another woman are on their way to give Jesus' dead body the respect and treatment he deserves.

But holy frijole! **Who moved the stone, and where's the body?** They find the right tomb, but it's empty. An angel was there and asked the women: *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples"* (Mt 28:6-7). Confused and afraid, yet full of joy, the ladies ran from the tomb to tell his disciples the good news.

³From an article by Charles E. Hill, "He Descended into Hell," cited by Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove: IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 221.

It was Sunday—oh glorious Sunday! And this did not happen in some corner. This was not a spiritual resurrection. It was **bodily**. Paul makes that clear in our text as he mentions numerous people who saw the risen Christ very much alive. Jesus appeared to Peter and the rest of the disciples. On another occasion, he appeared to more than 500 followers at the same time. Some have died since then, says Paul, but there are still plenty of eyewitnesses around to testify, *“I have seen the risen Christ with my own eyes!”* Then, Paul goes on to say, the resurrected Christ *“appeared to James and all the apostles. And last of all, as one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.”* Paul saw the risen Christ on the road to Damascus when Jesus knocked him off his high horse and converted him from a persecutor of the church to a gospel missionary and church planter. And there’s no doubt this is the same Jesus who was crucified and buried. They knew him by the nail-scars in his hands.

This is the gospel. On Friday, Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. Kaput! Gone! Finished! On Saturday his dead body lay on a cold stone slab in a borrowed tomb. But then came Sunday—earth-shaking, history-shaking Sunday—and Jesus Christ rose from the dead, from a tomb that R. C. Sproul calls *“a grave with a view.”*⁴ The light broke, the birds sang, the disciples laughed, the devil wept, death lost its stinger, and the earth rejoiced to feel Jesus’ feet again. Jesus is alive! Many saw him with their own eyes and believed.

The **heart of the gospel.** Paul couldn’t be clearer right here in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 – *“For I passed to you as most important what I also received: 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.”* This is more than *good news*, it’s the best news ever.

V

What are you going to do with this news?

⁴R. C. Sproul, *What We Believe: Understanding and Confessing the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 133.

Would you **believe the gospel** and put your trust in Jesus to save you from your sins? He's the only one who can save you. You can never good enough or do enough good things to save yourself. As Tim Keller likes to say, *"You are more sinful than you dare believe. But you are more loved than you ever dared hope."* Jesus loves you. Jesus can save you. He wants to save you. You are not beyond his love or his reach. Put your trust in Jesus to save you. Turn from your sins and believe the gospel. That's one response.

Here's another: would you **give thanks to God** for this indescribable gift? You believe already. Jesus has saved you from your sins. Don't take your salvation for granted? Don't swagger with a sense of entitlement. Humble yourself before your mighty Savior and give thanks.

And one more response: would you **live a gospel life**? Ken Medema calls it *"a blood-stained invitation to a life of sacrifice."* Grow into the holiness Jesus has planted in your life. Quit living as if you're not forgiven, carrying around guilt and shame that Christ bore for you on the cross. And quit living as if Christ is still dead—powerless, tossed about by every wind and wave. No joy, no peace, no life. Jesus is a living Savior. You have been born again. You are a new creation in Christ. In the power of God's Holy Spirit who indwells your life, live like it.

Don't hear the gospel and walk away as if someone told you it was going to be sunny tomorrow or rain next week. The gospel is not a mundane weather report. It is life-changing good news. Every time you walk away from the opportunity to respond to the gospel, your heart gets a little harder, your ears a little duller to the good news. Respond in some way to the Christ of the gospel ... today.

VI

In the seventeenth century, **John Bunyan**, Baptist pastor and author *Pilgrim's Progress* penned these lines to describe this entirely new way of living:

"Run, John, run"

The law commands

But gives me neither feet nor hands
Tis better news the Gospel brings
It bids me fly, It gives me wings.

The **creed says**, *“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son ... who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again.”*

That’s the heart of the gospel. I believe it. I plead with you to believe it and to soar on gospel wings to salvation and the gospel life.

Preached: September 12, 2021
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
John Scott McCallum II