

“The Gospel By Which You Are Being Saved”
1 Corinthians 15:1-4

This morning I want to answer a simple question: “What is the gospel?”

I hear people say, and I’m sure it’s meant with the best of intentions, they say, “we must live out the gospel!” But whatever they’re talking about, I can assure you, it’s not the gospel.

Last week on Facebook I saw someone write, “I want our kids to know and see that loving people is at the heart of the gospel.” And again, I know they mean well. But if what they mean is that they want their kids to know and see the example of their own *parents* loving other people— that’s not the gospel.

To feed the hungry and heal the sick and help the poor is not the gospel.

To tell people ‘we’re all God’s children’ is not the gospel.

To encourage people to follow their hearts is not the gospel.

Socialism is not the gospel.

Capitalism is not the gospel.

Social Justice is not the gospel.

Equality of outcomes is not the gospel. What is the gospel?

The gospel is not giving your testimony.

The gospel is not good advice.

The gospel is not a genre of music.

The gospel is not Oprah’s ‘truth within.’

The gospel is not a wedding sermon preached by Bishop Michael Curry.

The gospel is not something Mother Theresa ‘did,’ or Billy Graham ‘did,’ or something the Pope ‘does.’

None of these things are the gospel. What is the gospel?

To tell people God loves them and not tell them why, or how much, or what it cost Him to do so, is not the gospel.

To tell people to love God and love others is not the gospel. That’s actually the Law. That’s the summary of the 10 Commandments— but it’s not the gospel. It’s what we’re commanded to do, yes, it’s the fruit of the gospel, yes— but it’s not the gospel.

None of these things are the gospel by which you are being saved. What is the gospel? Our world is hopelessly confused by that question.

But the Bible is not confused about the gospel.

The Bible tells us *the gospel is something only God can do.*

The Bible tells us ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news,’ and God knows we need to hear the good news of what only He can do, preached over and over and again. And so He says to us, through the apostle Paul—

*“I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ²and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received—” What is the gospel?— “*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...*” (1Cor. 15:1-4)*

There you have it. The substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus is the gospel. **It’s the person and work of Jesus Christ. It’s who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done for you.** *The gospel is something only God can do.* And so first, we are told, Jesus died for us. *V.3 say this, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”*

Christ Died For Our Sins

It’s 9 o’ clock on a Friday morning. Roosters can still be heard in the distance, crowing from the city, but their cries are intermixed with those of three men on a hill called ‘The Skull.’ The men are shoved down on their backs so the transverse beams they’ve been tied to and forced to carry through the busy streets slam into the ground and cause them to arch their bodies in pain.

Four soldiers are assigned to each man, their tasks overseen by a centurion. Each team of four works together with efficient precision to nail the hands of their man now to this horizontal beam. Two of the criminals struggle and curse and scream between the ringing blows of a hammer. The soldiers who hold them down laugh, hearts hardened by the repetition of the task, humanity dulled by the cheap wine provided to keep them working without complaint.

But the team with the third man finds Him different. When offered wine mixed with gall to dull the pain, He refuses. He too is forced down on His back. He too

arches His whipped and bleeding body in pain. He too cries out as His arms are stretched wide and the nails are driven deep into his flesh. But He doesn't resist them. He doesn't struggle or spit or curse.

How far is the east from the west? This far.

How great is the joy set before Him? This great.

How wide is the way through the sea of judgment? This wide.

The soldiers laugh at Him too, but it's forced. This one is strange. They take another swig of wine and put it out of their minds. It's just another day.

Ropes are attached now to the horizontal beams, and the three men are first dragged, then hoisted up the face of the vertical posts of their crosses, already fixed and waiting in the ground. When they're high enough, the beams are attached to the posts with nails and ropes by the soldiers, and for a moment, the criminals sag down beneath the weight of their own bodies, supported for the first time by nothing but the nails in their arms or wrists.

The downward pull begins to dislocate their arms, spots swim before their eyes, the pain threatens to rob them of consciousness. Their feet scramble against the rough-hewn wood of the beams behind them, they try to push up, try to relieve the pain and pressure. But their diaphragms are unable to rise to exhale and gather more air, and their movements are becoming more feeble— They're starting to suffocate.

Quickly, the soldiers add a small block beneath the feet of each man, something to help them push their bodies up to catch their breath. But it's not an act of mercy. Instead, these doomed men, who would otherwise be dead in minutes, will now prolong their own torture for hours and even days on end. Their feet are tied or nailed to the platforms, and the soldiers stand back to admire their work.

Three crosses, three men. The two on the outside are thieves we're told, believed by some to be the companions of the murderer Barabbas. He too was meant to die here, hung between his companions, but his cross is now occupied by another. His place has been taken by a substitute so that Barabbas can go free. And on this middle cross between thieves, a placard is placed above the gasping stand-in, a hand-written sign with words penned by Pilate himself, a sign declaring the man's name, and His claim, and His crime: "*This is Jesus the king of the Jews,*" it declares in three languages.

The man who hangs between thieves is **Jesus**.
The Seed promised to the Patriarchs and foretold by the prophets.
The baby born in a manger.
The Lord announced by angels.
The Child visited by shepherds and wise men.
The King feared by tyrants and imposters.

The man who hangs between thieves is **Jesus**.
The boy called out of Egypt by His Father.
The boy who stayed behind in the temple to be about His Father's business.
The boy who went back to Nazareth and was submissive to His earthly parents.
The boy who grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and with men.

The man who hangs between thieves is **Jesus**.
The son of Mary who saved a wedding.
The Son of God who pleased His Father in the waters of baptism.
The Son of Man who has the authority on earth to heal blind men and lepers, control nature and cast out demons, call the outcast to His side and the dead to life through the forgiveness of sins. Three crosses, three men. But one is not like the others. "This is Jesus," the sign says of the man who hangs between thieves—"the king of the Jews."

"He saved others, he cannot save himself," the chief priests and scribes sneer. They're unhappy about the sign, and this is how they spin it— *"He is the King of Israel?"* they say— *"Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him."*

He can summon 10,000 angels with a word, but He's quiet. No doubt in heaven at this very moment they strain against His silence, swords quivering with rage, desperate for the signal, desperate to rain down wrath and dash to pieces every trace of these wretched men who dare even *gaze* with contempt upon their Lord. But like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth. He is here by choice. There is no other way to save. *The gospel is something only God can do.*

Beneath Him the oblivious soldiers busy themselves now with the few perks of the job, dividing up His garments between them. One gets His headgear perhaps, another His heavy outer cloak. A third is delighted to get His belt, and maybe the fourth receives the sandals in which Jesus has walked a lifetime in our shoes. But

His seamless inner tunic, made perhaps by His own dear mother who stands watching at a distance, *this* they do not divide by tearing, but cast lots for it. “Yes,” the old man Simeon had warned her when she’d first brought Jesus to the temple, “*a sword will pierce through your own soul also.*” It’s hard to think of a better way to describe the suffering of Mary as she watches the suffering of her son. But it wasn’t the only prophetic warning about this day.

“dogs encompass me,” King David wrote centuries earlier—
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me”— and here, at this point, John in His Gospel continues the quote from Ps. 22—
“they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

These men freely do what they want to do, even as God directs every detail.

And so the King of the Jews and the King of all heaven and earth hangs there, stripped and naked before mocking eyes. In the Garden, Adam and Eve are clothed by God, the guilt of their sin covered by the skins of the *first* sacrifice. And here now at Golgotha, the *last* sacrifice is stripped of His dignity to finally bear their shame.

But while the thieves beside Him curse in their agony, Jesus blesses with a prayer of forgiveness those who kill Him. While the crowds mock and jeer, Jesus finds the face of His mother in their midst and tenderly secures her care into the hands of a friend. And as the sky turns black at noon, Jesus accepts the recognition of His royalty from the lips of the dying criminal beside Him, and comforts him as well—
“Today,” Jesus says, *“you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Three hours later, it is finished. Jesus cries out loudly from the cross, lowers His head to His chest, and at the very moment thousands of Passover lambs are being slaughtered at the temple, He breathes His last. The earth convulses, the ground shakes, rocks split and tremble in sudden violence, and the temple curtain that separates the throne of God from His people is ripped from top to bottom. In the temple of His own broken body, Jesus has accomplished for humanity all that the temple of stone never could. It now stands obsolete. The old has gone, the new has come. *Jesus* is the way to God’s throne.

The soldiers cower, blind with fear— this darkness isn't right, this quaking isn't right, something about this day, about this man, just isn't right. But the supervising centurion stares at Christ's lifeless face. He's watched many die, but none as this man has, as though His life were His own to lay down and take up as He pleased. He's missed something, he's sure of it, but one truth is clear: This man was innocent. "This man," he declares, and doesn't care now who hears him— "This man was the Son of God."

He is crucified at 9am, and at 3pm, He is dead. It took God 6 days to create the world through His Son, and on the 7th day, God rested. And now here on the cross, it takes the Son 6 hours to secure the salvation of all who believe— and now He rests. Even in His death, He keeps the Sabbath, and quits His work before sundown Friday. *"Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures."*

Maybe you hear this story and you just can't make sense of it— why would anyone call that day 'Good Friday?' What a senseless, stupid tragedy! Why did Jesus have to die?...

***What does it even mean?**

And so before we can understand the good news of the gospel, I think we must first understand the bad. And the bad news is this— that a perfect and Holy God requires a perfect and holy standard we can't live up to. Thanks to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, humanity has been plunged into punishment for sin.

Their act of disobedience was the birth of sin into human history, a deadly seed of rebellion that took root in the human heart and has been passed on to every one of us, and compounded, ever since. Every sin we add to theirs, great or small, is an act of cosmic treason.

Romans 5:12 tells us *"sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..."* Human sin has separated humanity from God ever since, from the source of all life and fulfillment, perfection and purpose— and this was a spiritual and physical death sentence for us.

Our relationship with God died that day they sinned— every disposition, every inclination, every desire for the things of God died, *"None is righteous, no, not*

one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.” All that remained was the imprint, the shadow of what might have been.

So that while the *longings* still remain that keep us looking for love and peace and justice, that keep us seeking after joy, or hope, or forgiveness, all good things— while the *longings* for these remain, our dead hearts refuse to look to the only One who can satisfy us.

And in addition to the death of true fulfillment came the death of human bodies as well, bodies that were meant to last forever. The paycheck for the sin we inherit, and the sin we all choose, is both a physical death and spiritual death that leads to hell. That’s what we’re owed for our sin. We’re born sinners, and God demands perfection. *That’s the bad news.*

But the good news is this— “*God shows his love for us,*” Paul says in Rom. 5:8, “*in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

The famous theologian Karl Barth once said the most important word in the whole New Testament is that little word ‘for;’ it’s the Greek word ‘*huper.*’ It means ‘in behalf of.’ The Bible says God the Father sends God the Son as a ‘second Adam,’ a ‘better Adam,’ and He lives the perfect life we should have lived in our place *for us, in behalf of us.* And not only that— He then offers up that perfect life as a substitutionary sacrifice *for our sins, in behalf of* all our acts of treason, on the vertical altar of the cross. He lives the life we should have lived, and then He voluntarily dies the death we deserve to die.

Even the best sinful man could never substitute himself for other people in a way that would make God forgive sins. *The gospel is something only God can do.* A sinful man can only die for his own sins. But a *perfect* man is another matter. Just as the animals for the O.T. sacrifice were required to be without blemish, so Jesus comes as the final sacrifice all those animals pointed to all along. And so the Bible says the sin of the world is transferred into Christ’s account, every evil thing you’ve ever done or will do, and He is punished for it in your place.

You are Barabbas, and Jesus takes your place between thieves while you go free. He comes as the perfect sacrifice, like a sponge that’s never taken on water, and He takes on all your sin and guilt and shame.

So that on the cross, writes R.C. Sproul, “*Jesus Christ became an obscenity. The sin of the world was imputed to Him... The obscenity of the murderer, the*

obscurity of the prostitute, the obscenity of the kidnapper, the obscenity of the slanderer, the obscenity of all those sins, as they violate people in this world, were at one moment focused on one man. Once Christ embraced that, He became the incarnation of sin, the absolute paragon of obscenity.” *“For our sake,”* says 2 Cor. 5:21, *“he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* Jesus takes on the obscenity of your sin so it can be punished in Him, wrung out in His blood, instead of yours. He bears the consequences so that you, who are made righteous, can go free.

And not just you— think now of Adam and Eve. Think of Noah. Think of Abraham. Think of Moses and Joshua and David, think of every human being in the O.T. who ever offered a sacrifice in order to be forgiven for sin. The death of those animals could *never* satisfy the requirements of justice for human sin— they were only placeholders for this day, the day of judgment and mourning prophesied in Amos 8. *“On that day,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.”*

Try to imagine it. From noon to 3pm, the sky grows dark over the Hill of the Skull as all the pent-up judgment of God is now unleashed upon one man on a cross in concentrated fury. *“God,”* says theologian Wayne Grudem, *“had not simply forgiven sin and forgotten about the punishment in generations past. He had forgiven sins and stored up his righteous anger against those sins. But at the cross, the fury of all that stored-up wrath... was unleashed against God’s own Son.”*

There, suspended between heaven and earth, Jesus receives the paycheck the world is owed into His own account. Both a physical death-penalty and a spiritual death-penalty— an eternity of hell— are poured out on Jesus in the space of a few hours as He hangs there on the cross— *for you*. *“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”*

And then, our text says in V.4, *“he was buried.”*

He Was Buried

It is done. The old man named Joseph can see the multitudes dispersing, beating their breasts in rote sorrow. He checks the sky, the unusual darkness now clearing. He can’t be sure, but he thinks there might still be time. The Sabbath is coming.

He hurries back to the city and is met on the way by another member of the Council, the only other man he trusts, the only other member of the Sanhedrin who, like him, did not cast his vote against Jesus. They hadn't even been invited. Nicodemus greets him, his face a mask of sorrow. "I will get the spices," is all he says. Joseph nods in comprehension and hurries on.

He arrives at Pilate's court and summons his courage. It comes quickly after what he's seen this day, and his request for the body of the most unpopular man in Jerusalem is granted with little more than surprise that Jesus is already dead. But a centurion who was there confirms it. "He was innocent," Joseph hears him say as he's leaving.

Back at the cross, Nicodemus is waiting. They're not young men anymore, and he's brought help, and together they ease the body of Jesus down. "The shroud," says Joseph, and they wrap the body with care. "Where?" Nicodemus asks. Joseph points. "My tomb," he says. Everything is moving quickly, too quickly for the importance of the man and the task at hand, but night is coming. They bear Him to the tomb who bore the sin of the world, and gently, they lay Him down.

The women who love Jesus watch all this from a distance— will the sorrows never end? Who are these men who take their Lord? How do they presume the right to do this, to rob them of this final act of love? But sorrow clouds their thinking. They could not take Him down. They have no shroud to clothe Him. They have no tomb to guard His precious flesh.

But look— these men, they... look how they gently wrap Him. Look how they tenderly carry the Master they never claimed 'til now. Look, look at the spices— myrrh, they see, and aloes in great number. It is a hero's burial they give Him. It is a farewell to a King! And the women sigh and weep and turn now homeward as night falls, and as a great stone is rolled in front of the rich man's tomb. "he was buried," our text says.

***But what does it mean?** Why does that detail matter?

Paul includes these three words to assure us that Jesus really died. Our sins really died with Him, and the penalty for those sins really was paid in full. To say someone is buried is to say they really died.

Because you don't bury a loved-one given over to your custody if He's still a living man or a passed-out man or even a very injured man— you only bury a *dead* man. Neither do you need to bother burying a myth, or a spirit-being. You can only bury

a real, flesh and blood, historical human being. And that's who Jesus is. Even agnostic scholar Bart Ehrman says that any "claim that Jesus was simply made-up falters on every ground."

And so the point of mentioning His burial is this— a flesh-and-blood Jesus really died. A flesh-and-blood Jesus walked in your shoes and felt what you feel— pain, fatigue, hunger, anger, sorrow, betrayal, injustice, even death. In His astonishing love, God the Son fully suffered the indignities of sin's consequences with humanity in a flesh-and-blood body, omitting nothing. From conception in the womb to the last fading glimpse of His loved-ones' faces, to the cold resting of His corpse beneath the earth, Jesus traveled the full human journey. "he was buried," the text says.

But finally, it says in V.4, "...he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

Bob Goff writes about Christ's death that "Darkness fell, His friends scattered, hope seemed lost—but heaven just started counting to three." Friday was Day 1, the day He died. Saturday was Day 2, the day He rested in peace. And Sunday morning, just as dawn began to break in the eastern skies, Day 3 began.

It's still dark on a Sunday morning as the women trudge along towards the tomb carrying spices for the body of Jesus. Yes, those kind men did something, but *they* must do something too. Shouldn't love be shown? Shouldn't love cost them too? They must do *something*. They have to try. The stars look down in silence. A cold mist clings to the trees. No one speaks.

Mary the mother of James shivers and rewraps her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. Mary Magdalene leads the way, her small oil lamp flickering in the gentle currents that stir around them. The light is faint, illuminating just enough of the path to allow them to see the next step. Joanna and a few others bring up the rear, including Salome, who secretly wonders why they're going at all. How will they roll back the stone? Why should they bother? She's ashamed at her thoughts, but still she wonders— what will it change?— *Jesus is still dead in a tomb.*

Suddenly the ground beneath them trembles, then shakes violently, and the women cry out in fear. It stops and they look at each other, eyes wide, uncertain.

What should they think? What should they do? But before they can speak, Mary Magdalene is running— she’s running towards the tomb.

The others scramble after her in confusion, trying to catch up, passing, as they go, a handful of stumbling soldiers running scared the other way, running as if they’ve seen a ghost.

The dawn is grey now as they turn the corner, but light enough to see that the stone... THE STONE!— they halt in confusion, looking around. No one else is here, but the great stone of the sepulchre has been rolled back to reveal the gaping hole of the tomb behind it. Urgency is replaced now with dread. What is this? What’s happening?

They cling to each other and move forward slowly until they reach the first steps descending down into darkness. Mary Magdalene peers inside. “Hello?” The sound of her voice echoes off the hand-hewn walls. It’s silly— who does she think will answer? She turns back to the others when a voice from behind her speaks: “Do not be afraid.”

And the tomb is filled with light.

And the women fall to their faces.

Because suddenly they’re not alone. Two men standing in dazzling clothes are with them.

And the men say to them, *“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise?”* (Luke 22:5-8)

“...he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

‘Well,’ you might say, ‘thank you for that beautiful story— but honestly, and I mean no disrespect, it’s about something that happened 2,000 years ago— why should I care?’

What Does It Mean for me?

Theologian Wayne Grudem writes, *“In his resurrection, Jesus earned for us a new life just like his.”* What does the resurrection of Jesus mean? It means that because Jesus was raised from the dead, we can be raised from the dead too! Both inside and out, both spiritually and physically, both now, and in the future. But first, His resurrection means we can be raised to life *spiritually, right now.*

If Jesus had never been raised from the dead, no dead heart could ever be raised to life either! Our dead dispositions towards God would keep us running from Him, not running to Him! Titus 3:5,6 says God “...*saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...*”

Well, that washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit that must happen for *anyone* to turn to God and be saved, that never would happen to anyone if Jesus had not been raised. Let that sink in. To use the words of the Bible, if Jesus had not been raised, no one could have been ‘born again.’ And that would be a problem, because Jesus says to Nicodemus in In Jn. 3:3, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”

And so it’s only because *Jesus* is alive, it’s only because *Jesus* did not stay dead, but rose from the grave, that any lost soul can be brought back from death to life as well, by the grace and power of God. Jesus earns new life for us when He rises on Resurrection Sunday.

So that Peter, the first man to enter the empty tomb, can later write, “*we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (1Pet. 1:3). What he’s saying is that Christ’s *resurrection* is directly responsible for our spiritual *regeneration*, for us being ‘born again.’ In other words, if you’re a Christian, your spirit has been brought from death to life as a direct result of Christ being brought from death to life. You’ve been brought to life through that same resurrection that raised Jesus.

This is also why the apostle Paul can say in Eph. 2:5,6 that “*even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive **together with Christ** (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him.*”

ILLUSTRATION

When I was in third grade in Africa, one of the missionaries promised to make a rope swing for us kids that was better than anything we’d ever seen. To show us what he meant, he pointed to one of the biggest trees on the mission station, growing right on the edge of a downhill slope, and said, “We’ll put the swing in *that* tree.”

Well, we were skeptical. And the *reason* we were skeptical was because the lowest branch on *that* particular tree was at least 30ft. high— and *nobody* had a ladder that high. We all laughed at the missionary, imagining how funny it would

be to see him trying to jump from the top of a ladder to reach the branch, or better yet— trying to climb the huge tree, which happened to have spikes growing out from all sides of the trunk.

But the next day that man blew our minds. He walked up underneath the lowest branch holding a rope for the swing, picked up a rock, and tied that rope to the rock like a weighted anchor. And then, making sure he had enough slack, he simply threw that rock over the branch. The rock went up, up, up— over the branch— and then down, down, down, to the other side. And the rock carried the rope along with it.

And so it is with us— when Paul says “[God] made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him,” he’s saying that on that first Easter, on that morning when the earth shook and death was forced to begin working backwards, on that day as God the Father was raising Jesus back to life, He was also raising you.

Friends, if your spirit is alive, if your trust is in Jesus, it’s only because God tied your life to Christ’s. *Jesus* is the Rock that goes up from the grave. The gospel is something only God can do. And because our lives are tethered to Christ’s life by grace, through faith— as He goes, so do we— up, up, and over the wall of death, all the way to new life on the far side of His tomb. The Rock carries the rope along with it.

And He doesn’t just earn *new life* for us in His resurrection— by rising from the dead, Jesus also earns our *justification*. In Rom. 4:25 the apostle Paul says “[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” What that means is that by raising Jesus from the dead, God was giving His final stamp of approval to Christ’s redemptive work. The resurrection was God’s way of saying that what Jesus did in His life and death to save us was enough for God to consider us righteous and forgiven in His sight. And since we’re tethered to Jesus, Jesus’ justification by God is our justification too! *To be justified means Jesus has earned for us God’s stamp of approval!*

“When we are justified,” says Rev. Jordan Cooper, “the verdict of the last day is declared on us NOW.” What does that mean? It means that if you put your trust in Jesus today— if you will believe that what Jesus did by dying and rising again, He did for you, *to save you*— then on Judgment Day, you don’t need to be afraid of what God will say. Because God’s verdict for you then will be the same as it is

today: “NOT GUILTY.” God’s verdict for you then will be the same as God’s verdict was for His own Son, spelled-out in an earthquake and a rolled-away stone and an empty tomb: “NOT GUILTY.” The Rock carries the rope along with it.

And yet the resurrection of Jesus means still more. It means finally that we are not only raised from death to life *spiritually*— but that one day, just like Jesus, our bodies too will be raised from the grave *physically*.

That the future we look forward to if we’ve already been born again spiritually, is not a disembodied cloudland with harps, but a future of perfected *physicality*.

In first Corinthians 15:20,22 Paul writes, “*Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*”²³ *But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.*”

The ‘firstfruits’ refers to a sheaf of the first ripe stalks of the barley harvest coming up out of the ground that were required to be brought and ‘waved’ before the Lord as an offering during the Jewish *Feast of Firstfruits*. “The word [Firstfruits] comes to involve two ideas,” says Albert Barnes— “That first sheaf of ripe grain was not only the first in order of time [to be harvested], but was [also] the earnest or pledge of the entire harvest which was soon to [follow].” In other words, ‘firstfruits’ promises there will be ‘later fruits!’

And friends, it’s no coincidence that the Sunday Jesus rises from the dead is the first day of the Jewish *Feast of Firstfruits*. So that just as Adam was the first in a long line of death, Jesus is now intentionally positioned and pictured as the first in a long line of resurrection *life*! “The Lord Jesus,” writes John Ritchie, “honored the day... by presenting Himself to God as the First-born from among the dead. Israel’s priest no doubt waved the sheaf in empty form, before a rent veil in the temple at Jerusalem, but outside the city’s gates, God had reaped the Great Wave-sheaf from Joseph’s tomb early that same morning.”

Just as someone being introduced as ‘the first-born’ implies there is a ‘second-born,’ in a greater way, Jesus’ title of ‘firstfruits’ promises there will be ‘later fruits!’ And we are the ‘later fruits’ still waiting our turn to rise.

One day, the Bible says, we who belong to Jesus through faith, both those living now and the saints of God already dead, we will be raised up in glorified bodies just like the physical body of Jesus was raised up on Easter Sunday. Our 3rd day is

coming. Paul says in Romans 8:11, *“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”*

Paul writes elsewhere in Phil. 3:20,21, *“our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body **to be like his glorious body...**”*

And what is Christ’s “glorious body” like after the resurrection? If that’s the prototype of what we will be changed into, what can we expect? Well, when Jesus appears to His disciples in Luke 24, they’re sure He’s a ghost. But what does He say to them?— *“See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself,”* He says— *“Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”* Our new bodies will have *flesh and bones!*

But not flesh-and-bones like the body of Lazarus, who eventually dies again after being raised. Jesus is raised up to a *new* kind of human life, in which His body is made perfect, no longer subject to weakness, aging, or death, but able to live eternally.

And Paul describes our new bodies the same way in 1 Corinthians 15, calling them “imperishable.” It’s a word that means our new bodies will never wear out or grow old or be subject to any kind of sickness or weakness again. Instead, they will be healthy and strong forever. **Death will be out of a job.** It’s the reason Paul ends chapter 15 with these words we sing each Easter, *“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”* Our 3rd day is coming.

And when will that day be? It seems like this victory over death is taking forever. People I love have died this year, 2,000 years after the resurrection. People you love have died too. And yet Paul warns us this will take time— *“The last enemy to be destroyed is death,”* He says.

Yes, death is defeated on Easter Sunday. The death blow to death came that day. But like a chicken with its head cut off, death continues to run wild and make a mess, and will do so yet a little longer.

Until one day, for the people of God, death will finally fall over and be still— even as we’re raised at the sound of a trumpet and a shout. *“For the trumpet will sound,”* says Paul, *“and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be*

changed.” At that sound, we’re promised, at that signal of Christ’s return, the rest of God’s new humanity will be raised from an empty tomb, trailing after the Rock of Christ Jesus in bodily resurrection.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...”

“*This is the gospel by which you are being saved,*” writes Paul, “*if you hold fast to the word I preached to you.*” *The gospel is something only God can do.* And so now you have a choice: Will you receive what God has done for you and be saved? If so, hold fast to this good news by trusting the person and work of Jesus, who DIED, AND IS ALIVE.

He is Risen!— He is Risen Indeed!