

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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Date: 06 August 2017

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[0 : 00] In matters of the faith, what is of first importance?

And when I say matters of the faith, I'm referring to the Christian faith, the faith that we profess, of the content of that faith. What is of first importance?

There's much that we could say comes within the content of the faith. But of all that lies within that content, what is of first importance?

Well, that's a question that Paul answers in his letter to the believers in Corinth. And he uses that very language in chapter 15 and in verse 3.

We've read this verse already. I'll read it again. 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, and that He appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve.

[1 : 10] And it goes on to speak of others that He appeared to. And when we notice what Paul identifies as of first importance, we perhaps readily focus in on the reality that Christ died for our sins.

And we'd all, I think, acknowledge that that is of first importance and that He was raised to life. And again, as Christians, we wouldn't hesitate to recognize that that truth is of first importance.

But the death and the resurrection of Jesus are not the only events that Paul identifies as of first importance. There's another event.

You could argue that there's two other events that he highlights. But the one that we want to notice is one that he explicitly mentions there in verse four, that he was buried.

And for reasons that we want to explore that aren't maybe immediately apparent, Paul identifies this as being of first importance, that he was buried.

[2 : 18] Why would that be of first importance? And I did a quick kind of survey of commentaries on this passage, not only books that I've got, but just went online and just Googled the verse and see if I could recognize some perhaps more well-known writers or preachers to see what they had to say about it.

And it was striking how so often little mention or sometimes no mention was made of this part of what Paul says, that Jesus was buried.

To just give one example to illustrate that, some of you may have heard of Al Mohler. Al Mohler is the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the United States, perhaps better known for a daily podcast that introduces The Briefing.

It's a daily analysis of news and events from a Christian worldview. And in fact, in the passing, I would recommend very insightful comments on what's happening in the world.

Now, the reason that I mentioned Mohler is that I found an article online where he comments on this passage, and he writes, and I'll just read what he writes, or a small part of what he writes, and what is of first importance?

[3 : 40] He poses that same question, and he answers on the basis of this passage that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

The cross and the empty tomb stand at the center of the Christian faith. Without these, there is no good news, no salvation. Now, one of the events that Paul explicitly mentions is largely untouched on, the burial of Jesus, though he does make reference to an empty tomb, so I suppose it's implicit there.

But that's true of many who speak about or who comment on this verse or these verses. Interestingly, the Apostolic Creed picks up on the emphasis of Paul in this regard.

Now, the Apostolic Creed is a very brief summary of Christian doctrine that is adhered to by, you know, really almost the whole of Christendom, and seeks in very short compass to stress those things that are of first importance.

And what do we read in that creed? Well, it begins as follows. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary.

[5 : 10] He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. And it goes on. I won't continue until the end. Why is the fact that Jesus was buried of first importance?

Maybe before trying to answer the question, I do acknowledge that a case could be made that argues that Paul is concerned to outline a series of historical events that together constitute the gospel story, or the key events, in terms of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection.

And it's the big picture that he's concerned with, these events, and how together they are of, if you wish, of first importance.

And if that's what Paul is doing, the question could be posed, are we entitled to focus in on one of these events? In this case, the burial, and to try and draw out some distinctive significance to that one event.

I think we are. Paul does seem to be, here in what he writes to the Corinthians, he seems to be deliberately outlining related but separate events that each has a significance of its own, as well as the significance of the whole that they form a part of.

[6 : 31] So, there's the whole, death, burial, resurrection, and there's huge significance to that. But each part, each event in the sequence also has its own distinctive significance, is what Paul would seem to be indicating by the language he uses.

So, again, it returns us to the question, why then is the fact that Jesus was buried of first importance? I'm going to suggest four answers to this question, but of the four, the first is, without doubt, the principal answer.

Indeed, it would be probably quite legitimate just to give you the first answer and leave it there, because I think that really responds to the question or answers the question adequately.

But I'm going to give you two or three other answers that perhaps complement the first answer. But the stress is on the first one. Well, what is the first answer to the question that we pose?

Why is the fact that Jesus was buried of first importance? And I think the principal answer is this, that his burial is evidence of the fact that Jesus really died.

[7 : 41] The stress that Paul makes on his burial, the stress that there is in other parts of the New Testament on his burial, has that as its principal intention to highlight, to make explicit this reality that Jesus really died.

Even that language of Jesus having really died is language that you find in one of the classic reform catechisms. In the Heidelberg Catechism, question 41 is as follows, why was he buried?

It's interesting that that would even be a question in a catechism, but it is. Why was he buried? And the answer to the question is, and I think this answer reflects the biblical emphasis, the answer is his burial testified that he had really died.

That's why he was buried, because his burial testifies to the fact that he really died. That purpose, if you wish, that is served by stressing somebody's burial is also something you find in the Bible, in Acts chapter 2, in Peter's sermon at Pentecost.

He's speaking not about Jesus, but about David, but he stresses his burial as a means of stressing and highlighting the fact that David had really died.

[9 : 05] So, in Acts chapter 2 and verse 29, we read, Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.

And what is Peter trying to do there? He's trying to remind the folk that David died and that he really died. He was buried. His tomb is evidence of the fact that he died, that he really died.

Now, that then leads on maybe to another question. Why is it important to establish and stress that Jesus really died? If that's the purpose of stressing that he was buried, to highlight that he really died, why is that important, to be persuaded that he really died?

Well, one reason why it's important is that this is a truth that is sometimes challenged. Some claim that Jesus, though crucified, never really died. And the unlikely bedfellows of this claim are, on the one hand, some Muslims.

And I'm going to read from the Koran in a moment just to see what is stated there about Jesus' death, inadverted commas. But then others who question whether Jesus really died are liberal skeptics, who question the truth of the gospel accounts.

[10 : 27] We'll start with what is said in the Koran. And I just quote what is stated there in one or two verses in part of the Koran.

Now, to explain, the first few words are purported to be words that the Jews declared about what they had done, and then the Koran goes on to comment on that. And it says as follows, We slew the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.

And then the commentary is this, but as part of the text of the Koran. Whereas, in fact, they had neither slayed him nor crucified him, but the matter was made dubious too. But there seems to be competing interpretations among Muslims, though I claim no expertise in this.

But two certainly competing interpretations that I've come across are that one is that another man was mistakenly crucified in his place.

And so, yes, there was a crucifixion, and the guy who was crucified died, but he wasn't Jesus. And so that's the explanation given. But the other interpretation that's told to is that Jesus was crucified, but he didn't actually die.

[12 : 00] And then he was taken down from the cross, he was placed in the tomb, and he swooned in the tomb and came back to life. Not that he had been dead, but recovered consciousness, I suppose.

Well, that is the position held by some of our Muslim friends. As far as the skeptics go, the resuscitation or swoon theory that first emerged or perhaps re-emerged in the early 19th century was then popularized by the so-called Jesus Seminar.

I don't know if you've ever come across the Jesus Seminar, usually at Easter. It's the time when you have some fancy theory comes up questioning the reliability of the Gospels. And often the authors of this supposedly new idea are those who make up this so-called Jesus Seminar.

It emerged in the 1980s and I think continues to this day. And it's really made up of a motley crew of academics on a quest to find what they call the historical Jesus.

And very much intent on, as they would say, demythologizing the Gospel accounts. Oh, there's all this myth and all these miracles that clearly didn't happen.

[13 : 12] What really happened is what they claim to be pursuing. And interestingly, those who question whether Jesus really died often point to the passage that we were looking at this morning, that we read again this evening.

And the fact that Pilate, you'll remember, was surprised that Jesus had already died. You know, when Joseph of Arimathea approaches and he asks for the body of Jesus, Pilate's surprised.

He thought that it would take longer for Jesus to die. And he calls the centurion and the centurion says, Yeah, he really is dead and so permission is given. But some people jump on that and say, Ah, you see, now there's an element of doubt there.

You know, there it's been recognized that it really should have taken longer for him to die. So, maybe he didn't actually die. I'm not going to deal with that right now, but I just mention it in the passing.

So, it's important to stress that Jesus really died as a defense of the Gospel accounts and of their entire ability. At that level, it's important to stress that.

[14 : 22] But also, and perhaps much more importantly, because the whole of the Gospel edifice crumbles if Jesus didn't really die. Death, we are told, is the sentence pronounced on sinners.

That is the Bible's message. And death is a requirement for atonement for sinners to be made right with God. Sin has to be dealt with.

The manner that God has determined for sin to be dealt with is the death of the one guilty of that sin. Jesus dies in our place. If He didn't really die, then as I say, the whole Gospel story falls apart and crumbles.

If Jesus had not died, the demands of God's law would not have been met, and we would remain enemies of God. So, did Jesus really die?

Now, for us, the fact that this is what the Bible records and declares is sufficient evidence. But for those looking for other evidence that points in the direction of what the Bible claims, that evidence does exist.

[15 : 32] First, in fairness, if we're talking about an event that happened 2,000 years ago, it's probably impossible to present evidence that would, with scientific precision, absolutely determine the truth of practically any event.

But nonetheless, we can identify evidence that points in the direction of the reliability of what the Gospel records concerning Jesus dying on the cross, and then, of course, subsequently being buried, and indeed being raised from the grave, though we're not going to touch on that this evening.

What evidence points in the direction or to the conclusion that Jesus really died? Well, if we think of what we're told about the circumstances of His death, we are given quite a vivid account, not detailed, but vivid account, of the torture that He was subjected to prior to the crucifixion.

I think we could reasonably conclude on the basis of that, that even before He was crucified, He was very much on the way to death. But then, perhaps more importantly, we have the reality of the deadly efficacy of crucifixion.

As I was reading a little bit about this, I was assured, though I can't vouch for this with complete certainty, that there's no record in ancient history of anyone surviving a crucifixion.

[17 : 00] But how was it that people died when they were crucified? And again, here I don't claim any expertise, but just a brief, perhaps for some of you, reminder of what was involved.

For those being crucified, the most common caught death was asphyxia. And that would have been true, we presume, for Jesus also. What would happen is that the position in which the condemned man was placed on the cross made it very difficult to breathe.

Pressure was placed on the lungs in such a way that it simply became difficult to breathe. And so, the only way to be able to breathe was by pushing up, using your legs to push up constantly to be able to catch your breath, and so continue alive.

That explains, of course, why it was the practice, if the intention was to accelerate death, the practice was to break the legs of the condemned man, the Bible itself, the Gospel accounts, speak of that, saying that that wasn't necessary for Jesus because he was already dead.

Well, what was the purpose of doing that? Well, if your legs had been broken, then you couldn't push yourself up, and so death was accelerated, death by asphyxia. Asphyxia, in turn, leads to cardiac arrest, arrest as the heart is deprived of oxygen.

[18 : 25] And this fact, the heart being deprived of oxygen, leading to cardiac arrest and death, this sheds light on a curious detail provided by John in his Gospel account.

In John chapter 19, and verses 33 to 34, let me just read that. But when they came to Jesus, the soldiers entrusted with the crucifixion, when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, the point that we just made.

Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. Now, that seemed a strange thing to say. What's that about?

Why would there be blood and water? Now, those who know about these things, and that's not me, but I can learn from others, explain that heart failure, which is what we've said, is what happens when you're being crucified, results in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart.

It's called a pericardial effusion, as well as around the lungs. Now, when the soldier pierced Jesus' side, the likely root of spear, though we're not told that, we're not given that detail, but the likely root would have been through his lung and into his heart.

[19 : 44] And if that indeed is what happened, when the spear was removed, what would come out of the wound, the open wound, would have been a liquid that looked like water, this effusion that is spoken of, or that I've just commented, and blood.

These would have been the two liquids that would have come out of that wound. And so it's quite a remarkable thing that John, who identifies himself as a witness, and interestingly, immediately following what he says there in the verses that I've read, he stresses, I am a witness of these things.

This is what I saw happen. And it's difficult to conceive how he could have made that up, how he could possibly have had the medical knowledge to make that up, if it wasn't actually what he saw.

And so for that, and for perhaps other reasons, as regards crucifixion as a very efficient means of killing somebody, everything points to the reality that the cross did its job.

It killed Jesus. Another element in this jigsaw, perhaps of many, there's one other that I'll mention, is that the expertise of the Roman soldiers. Roman soldiers were killing machines.

[20 : 55] They knew their job, and it's difficult to conceive of them failing in their duty of securing the death of crucified men. Apart from anything else, they knew the consequences of not doing their job properly, and they were very grievous ones.

So why the importance of the fact that Jesus was buried? Well, it serves as evidence that he really died. That, I think, is the principal answer to the question.

I think it's why Paul here, when he speaks of those things that are of first importance, he explicitly mentions that he was buried. It is part of making this objective historical case that Jesus really died.

But I think we can also answer the question in other ways that maybe complement that, and we'll do this much more fleetingly. First of all, his burial served as the necessary condition for him to be raised again.

Now, this is really just the other side of the coin to the previous point, namely that he really died, but I think it's worth stressing. Jesus really died, and Jesus really rose again.

[22 : 03] And his burial is the hinge, if you wish, that joins these two historical realities. Now, we'll leave the evidence for the resurrection perhaps for another day.

So that's, I think, a second answer to the question. A third answer to the question is that his burial served to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. And here we're going to limit ourselves to one verse that we touched on this morning in Isaiah 53, in verse 9, when there's this mention of his burial being with the wealthy.

Let's just read that verse, just one verse again, and remind ourselves of what it says. It's within the context of a chapter that is describing the suffering servant, the promised Messiah.

And we read there in verse 9 of Isaiah 53, he was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Now, we acknowledge that perhaps the first part of that verse, he was assigned a grave with the wicked, is a little bit difficult. It's normally understood as being a reference to the actual crucifixion, where he was in the midst of these two criminals, though the actual language here kind of would point more towards grave and tomb.

[23 : 21] What is clearer is this reference to the fact that he was accompanied by or was with the rich in his death.

And that is something that is, I think, rightly identified as being fulfilled in Joseph of Arimathea's involvement in his burial.

Joseph of Arimathea was described, as we were commenting this morning, as a rich man by Matthew. He had his own garden tomb that he placed at the disposition of Jesus and buried Jesus there.

And having done so, as the gospel accounts tell us, he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Now, that in itself is another curious detail that confirms the wealthy circumstances of Jesus' burial, which is our interest, given the verse there in Isaiah.

Critics, or perhaps some who, I don't know if you need to describe them as critics, but simply commentators who have a genuine interest in seeking out the truth, have in the past questioned this detail of the stone being rolled against the tomb.

[24 : 39] And the reason why that has been questioned in the past is that much of the archaeological evidence of garden tombs in and around Jerusalem that would have been there in the first century suggests that tombs were closed by a square or rectangular stone that acted like a kind of cork to seal the entrance.

But there's one detail, a very fascinating detail, and it is that of the many tombs that have been explored, apparently something around a thousand tombs, a few, a very few of them have been identified as having rolling stones that served as the door, if you wish, that which sealed the tomb.

But those very few were reserved for the very wealthy. Only the very wealthy would have had a tomb of that design. If you want to picture this rolling stone, it would have been less like a big sphere as it's usually pictured in pictures of the tomb, but more like a wheel on Fred Flintstone's car.

So if you can imagine Fred Flintstone's car and the wheels on that car, that seemingly is what it would have looked like and it could have been rolled to cover the entrance and indeed rolled back again when that was necessary for whatever reason.

And so we find even limiting ourselves to this one incident or this one verse, we find that Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah finds fulfillment in the burial of Jesus.

[26 : 13] And so his burial serves that purpose of confirming or fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. The final thing, and we'll mention it just very fleetingly and really skip over some of what I was going to say because it would take more time than we have this evening, but just mention it.

At his burial, together with his death and resurrection, these three events, if you wish, that Paul highlights serve as a symbol of the Christian experience or life.

In Romans chapter 6, the first four verses of that chapter, Paul compares these events in the life of Jesus in his death and resurrection to the Christian life or Christian experience.

And now there's a lot in that passage. Let me just read those two or three verses and then just very fleetingly comment. But let's just read Romans 6 verse 1.

What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. We die to sin. How can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

[27 : 29] We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. So there's a lot there, but in very broad brush terms, we can identify the parallels that Paul identifies between these three events, death, burial, and resurrection, and the experience of the Christian as we participate in a spiritual sense in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

The beginning of our Christian life, we die to sin and are united to Christ in his death. When we profess our newfound faith in baptism, we are united to Jesus in his burial.

We die to the old life. To read what Paul says, we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death. And as we continue in the Christian life, it is a new life that we live united to Jesus in his resurrection.

Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. And so these three events that Paul identifies as of first importance serve to provide a symbol or a parallel to the Christian life or experience.

Well, let's just draw things together and close. Why then is the fact that Jesus was buried of first importance?

[28 : 53] Well, as I said at the beginning and I just re-emphasize at the end, principally, because it points to the fact that he really died. Or it certainly stresses the conviction of the gospel writers that he really died and that that is really important.

And that, in consequence, he really was raised from the dead. His burial, as we've seen, also serves to fulfill Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah and to serve as a symbol of one important element in the Christian life.

But let me just close with the words of an 18th century commentator that some of you may be familiar with, Matthew Henry, who possibly sheds further light in the significance of the burial of Jesus in a garden tomb in the context of the big story of redemption.

And he writes suggestively in this way, in the garden of Eden, death and the grave first received their power. And now, in a garden, they are conquered, disarmed, and triumphed over.

In a garden, Christ began his passion and from a garden he would rise and begin his exaltation. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the gospel story.

[30 : 12] We thank you that it is a true story. We thank you for the historical events that make up and are the content of our faith, that your Son, our Savior Jesus, died on the cross for our sins, that he was buried, a dead man, and that he was raised again to life by his Father.

We thank you for these truths. We thank you for the huge implications of them and all that we gain from the reality of them as we embrace the one who died this death and was raised again in the manner described.

Help us to live that resurrection life united to our Savior and these things we pray in his name. Amen.