



Sermon Transcript

January 5, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

Christ as the Center

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 5, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Introduction

What strikes me about this passage is how central Jesus is to everything.

For starters, Jesus is central to the gospel Paul *preached* and *delivered*. Paul defines the gospel as being all about Jesus. He says in verses 3-4 that what he shared with them is of *first importance . . . that Christ died for our sins . . . that [Christ] was buried, that [Christ] was raised on the third day*. The gospel finds Jesus at the center.

But then we also discover that Jesus is central to all of Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Notice in verses 3 and 4 that when Paul refers to the death of Jesus for our sins and his resurrection he adds that phrase *in accordance with the Scriptures*. In other words, this is the very thing that the Bible was referring to—to Jesus. And yet, when Paul wrote these words, there was no New Testament. In fact, 1 Corinthians is one of the earliest written books of the New Testament. So when Paul says that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and rose again from the dead *in accordance with the Scriptures* he is thinking about the Old Testament. And so all of this divine revelation we have in the Bible is leading us to Jesus. Jesus is the center of Scripture.

Therefore, Jesus is the center to Paul's mission and ministry. When Paul says in verse 1—*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you*—the word he used for *preached* in verse 1 is the verb form for gospel. Literally he is saying, “I gospeled the gospel to you.” That is what the word *gospel* means, to herald good news! From the very beginning, they received this good news about Jesus. They took their stand in Jesus. They were being saved by this message. And so Paul says that at the center of his ministry and mission is “gospeling the good news about Jesus.” He sums up his ministry and mission in verse 11, *so we preach and so you believed*.

Jesus is at the center of the gospel. Jesus is at the center of the Scriptures. Jesus is the center of our message and mission. And so it begs the question, “Is Jesus at the center of your life?” I ask myself that question. Culture is something we assume and it is naïve to think that you and I—our faith—are not impacted by our culture. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was a prominent pastor a generation before, observed that the challenge facing the church in the West was unlike anything the church encountered before. He said, “the kind of problem facing us is altogether deeper and more desperate than that which confronted the Christian church for many a long century.”¹ The result is that we have become consumers of religion and consumers of church and not followers of Christ. When that happens, Jesus is no longer at the center. We are. Oh God, bring renewal!

In his book, *Reappearing Church*, Mark Sayers uses Howard Hughes as a symbol to illustrate what is happening in our secular western culture. Howard Hughes was as big as you could get in the mid-1900's. At the height of Hollywood's golden age, he was everywhere. He was an Academy Award winning Hollywood producer, property baron, daredevil pilot, and breaker of land speed records. He was tall, handsome, and smashingly rich. He dated scores of Hollywood's most desired women. Sayers says of him, "He was a walking advertisement for the freedoms of technology, sex, money, and power offered by the modern world."² But at some point in his forties, he became a recluse. He set up a movie projector in his room and his life consisted of endless binge watching his favorite movies while filling his body with pain-killing drugs. His only contact with the outside world was a telephone line. The second half of his life was marked by paranoia and suffocating anxiety.

This, Mark Sayers argues, is a picture of what is happening in our secular culture. The pursuit of unlimited freedom is not delivering the good life that it promised. Sayers observes, "We have endless opportunities to pursue pleasure and our desires, and yet so many of us are miserable and anxious. We can travel the world, time and space and yet loneliness is growing. Silicon Valley's promises that a world connected by social media will be a better, more tolerant world now looks ridiculous—if anything we are more polarized and angry than ever before."³ This is not a rant against technology. Rather, it is an observation that when self or the individual is at the center of life it cannot deliver what it promises. When God is removed from the center—when Jesus is out of the picture—we are not able to flourish.

I discovered something very interesting in my study this week. In Colossians 1:17, Paul says that in Christ "*all things hold together.*" The Greek word for *hold together* is the word from which we get our English word—*system*. The theologian Hendrick Berkhof notes from this, "this means that Christ is the system that holds the universe and all of Creation together."⁴ Pursuing unlimited freedom is not "the system" that leads to human flourishing. Instead, we learn that everything is an interconnected system and Christ is at the center of that system and living with Christ at the center of life is the key to human flourishing. The Hebrews call this a life of *shalom*. That is more than just a word that conveys "peace." It means to be "complete" or "whole." Or as Psalm 1 puts it, "*Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.*"

The Jesus who is at the center of the gospel . . . the Jesus who is at the center of the

Scriptures . . . the Jesus who is at the center of our mission and message—is the Jesus who is at the center of all of life. The “system” that holds life together is the system that has Jesus at the center of it. When Jesus is at the center of life, three things come together. You get an answer to the great questions of life. The Bible comes alive. And your life is changed forever.

Jesus: The answer to my questions

In our passage this morning, we have a very narrow description of the gospel. Paul said that this is the message that he preached to them and it is the message that they received. What was that message? It was the message that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and was buried and rose again from the dead. For many of us as evangelicals, we would say, “that is the gospel.” And yet, at the same time, you could say that this early creedal statement is the kernel of the gospel—the center of the gospel. There is so much we are assuming to be true in this statement that is not even mentioned.

For example, if I went up to someone on the street and asked them if they believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and that he was buried and rose again from the dead, and if the person is willing to engage in this conversation, he or she might respond by asking, “Who is this Christ?” So I would respond by saying that Jesus is the Son of God and that he is fully God and fully man. This may be a bit puzzling that a man would be God and so the person might respond by then asking, “Well, then, who is God?” To which I would say that God is Triune, three persons and yet there is one God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In addition to that, the person might want to know what I mean by sin and why would one have to die for sins. The next thing you know we are talking about the fall of man in Genesis 3, which brings us back to creation, the very beginning of all things. And so, can you see how this simple statement about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is both simple and at the same time is interconnected with so much more?

So if we were to outline the gospel from 1 Corinthians 15, we would outline it with verses 3-4. Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. But what might the outline of the gospel look like if you take all of Scripture into account? Nancy Pearcey suggests an outline that looks like this: Creation, Fall, Redemption.⁵ Each of these three points answer the major questions of life. Where did I come from and who am I? That is answered with Creation. What is wrong with the world? That is the question that is answered with the Fall. And then, the final question is this: What is the solution? That is the question that is answered with Redemption. These are the great questions of life

and every worldview—every person—consciously or unconsciously has a response to these questions.

When we stand at the casket of someone we love, there is something inside of us that says, “this isn’t right . . . I don’t like this.” Sarah Gilbert wrote a book called *Death’s Door*. In it, she describes her mother’s anguish at becoming a widow. On April 21, 1964 at 2:00 A.M., Sandra received a phone call from her mother and she said, “Well, I’m a widow . . . I knew it would happen, but I didn’t think it would be so soon.” And she kept repeating with dismay, “I’m a widow . . . I’m a widow.”⁶ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word widow comes from an Indo-European word meaning “to be empty, to be separated, to be divided, destitute or lacking.”⁷ And the point Gilbert makes is that as the widow stands by the casket of her spouse the etymology implies that she too has entered death, for she is filled with vacancy . . . And part of her has journeyed into the state in which the dead person has fallen.”⁸ Now this book is written by a secular author, who, as best as I can tell has no hope in resurrection. But even for those of faith, death brings real grief and sadness and as we stand by the casket there is something that cries out inside of us, “this is not right.”

I once saw a TV special by Barbara Walters and the topic was on the afterlife. She was interviewing a wide range of people who had differing views on the afterlife. One of her guests was an atheist and this is what he had to say. “Heaven doesn’t exist, hell doesn’t exist. We weren’t alive before we were born and we’re not going to exist after we die.” Then listen to what he said next. “I’m not happy about the fact that that’s the end of life.”⁹ That is a profound admission that I think betrays what he believes. Of course he is not happy about it. Deep down there is an emptiness if this is all there is.

But with Jesus at the center we know that there is hope beyond the grave. The third point of the gospel is Redemption! And it is a redemption for all of creation. Randy Alcorn writes, “God has never given up on his original creation. Yet somehow we have managed to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point clear” *Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect*. Each of these biblical terms begins with the *re*-prefix, suggesting a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost.”¹⁰ That is the gospel! It is more than just sins forgiven. It is God reclaiming his glory over his creation by restoring what is fallen and lost. And so when we stand by that casket and when we know that kind of loss and grief, we also are comforted because we know that resurrection is coming and God will restore all that is fallen and broken in this world. And so when Jesus is at the center of your “system” of living, you have a real answer to life’s most pressing questions.

Jesus: Brings the Bible Alive

Secondly, this is what brings the Bible alive. It is seeing how it all fits together as one story with Jesus at the center of the story. What is Paul saying when he says that “*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures . . . that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures?*” Keep in mind that Paul is thinking back to the Old Testament when he uses the word *Scriptures*.

I think our tendency is to read something like this and wonder where that hidden verse might be that prophetically spoke about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Admittedly, you can find such verses. For example in Isaiah 52-53 we read of a suffering Servant who was *wounded for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities.*” Or speaking of the resurrection from the Old Testament we might go to Psalm 16:10 where the psalmist prays with hope, “*For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol or let your holy one see corruption.*” And yet, often times we need Jesus and the New Testament to make these connections for us. It was Peter preaching in Acts 2 who tied the events of the resurrection of Jesus to Psalm 16 and we may not have naturally made that connection apart from the New Testament bringing that to light. So when Paul says that these things happened in *accordance with the Scriptures*, I don’t think he is sending us off to find some obscure verse in the Old Testament to make that connection for us.

Rather, what Paul is saying is so much bigger and more comprehensive than a proof text or an isolated verse that speaks of things to come in the future. When Paul says that *Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures . . . that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures* - he has in mind here the whole sweep of the Old Testament. It all points to Jesus. First of all, he uses the plural form for the word—*Scriptures*—which suggests he is speaking of the whole and not an isolated verse. And so through the grand sweep, the grand narrative of Scripture we see major themes emerge and they find their fulfillment in Jesus. Gordon Fee says it this way, “According to the Scriptures God had provided that the death of a spotless lamb should be part of Israel’s rescue from the bondage of Egypt. This in turn became part of the sacrificial system in which animals bore the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement. And this language is picked up once more in Isaiah to describe the one who *like a lamb led to the slaughter* took away the sins of the people.”¹¹ By the time Jesus comes along, with the Old Testament in the background, we understand the need for atonement and provision of a sacrifice to make that atonement for our sins. It is in *accordance with the Scriptures* and it finds its fulfillment in Jesus. When you make that connection, the Bible comes alive! This is what Jesus said of himself after his resurrection from the dead in Luke 24:44-45,

“Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms (the entire Old Testament) must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” and from the Old Testament he went on to show them he had to suffer on the cross, rise again and then “gospel the gospel” to all nations. This is the same thing he did with the two men on the road to Emmaus and after he opened the Scriptures to them—the Old Testament—to explain all that just happened with his death and resurrection they said, *“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures.”* When Jesus is at the center of the Bible, it comes alive.

Geoff Robson says it this way: “The heart of the Bible’s message can be summed up in one word: Jesus . . . The 66 books of the Bible come together to give us one big sweeping story that leads up to, and then flows out of, the coming of Jesus. Once you become familiar with the Bible, you’ll start to see the centrality of Jesus everywhere.”¹² That is the journey we are about to undertake over the next six months. I want to invite you to walk the road that the two men on the road to Emmaus walked with Jesus as he opened up to them the Scriptures and showed them how Jesus is at the center of it. It is my prayer that as you walk this road that your heart would also *burn within you*—that the Scriptures would come alive and that you would see Jesus. This road I invite you to travel has a long road and short road. I invite you to walk both roads with us over the next six months.

The long road is what we will do week after week for the next six months. We will begin next week with Genesis and story of Creation. We are going to make our journey through the Old Testament and this will take us to Palm Sunday on April 5. Then we will begin to make our way through the New Testament on Easter Sunday and this will take us through to the end of June. By the end of the six months, we will have put the entire story of the Bible together. So I want to encourage you to walk this long road with us. If you miss a Sunday, go and read or listen or watch the sermon on our website.

But then there is a short road you can walk to help you put the story of the Bible together. We will be hosting two one-day seminars (February 29 and April 25) that will put together the Old Testament and the New Testament in a period of 4 hours on a Saturday morning. Registration is open for the seminar on the Old Testament and space is limited so I would encourage you to register down stairs or online by January 12. After January 12, we are opening this seminar to those outside of the church. We already had an inquiry from Rhode Island about this seminar. The cost is \$20 a person and \$40 a family. We think it is suited for middle school students through adults.

Both the long road (our weekly Sunday services) and the short road (two one-day seminars) are going to follow an acronym for putting together the story of the Bible. It is CASKET EMPTY. CASKET stands for the Old Testament. EMPTY stands for the New Testament. CASKET stands for Creation—Abraham—Sinai—Kings—Exile—Temple: putting together the major turning points of the Old Testament. Carol Kaminski is a professor of Old Testament at Gordon Seminary and the one who developed this method of looking at the story of the Bible. She will be leading our seminar in February and she said this about the word CASKET to summarize the Old Testament: “You may be thinking to yourself that the title is rather morbid . . . The acronym CASKET is a poignant reminder therefore that sin, which leads to death, is Israel’s and our fundamental problem.”¹³ It points to our need for Jesus.

But then the word EMPTY describes the New Testament: Expectation—Messiah—Pentecost—Teachings—Yet to Come. The word EMPTY tells us that Jesus has come to free us from sin and death. Kaminski puts it this way, “it enables people to grasp the redemptive story of the entire Bible, with the person of Jesus at the center.”¹⁴

This is what makes the Bible unique. It is 66 books—written by over 40 authors—over a span of 1500 years . . . and yet it tells one story. Do you know that story? Do you know how it all fits together and how it points to Jesus? I’m telling you, when you get a glimpse of this and when Jesus is at the center of it all, the Bible comes alive.

Jesus: He will change your life

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives testimony to how this gospel that is centered on Jesus changed his life. And he is quick to recognize how unworthy he was to receive God’s grace. He said in verse 9, “*For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*” And then he says those great words we can all appreciate, “*But by the grace of God, I am what I am.*” If God can do that for Paul, he can do that for you!

Gaylord Kambarami was the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe. He once offered a copy of the New Testament to a young man who wasn’t interested. Instead, this young man said that he would use the pages to roll cigarettes and smoke them. Kambarami challenged him by saying, “I’ll give you this book if you promise to read every page before you smoke it.” More than ten years went by and Kambarami was attending a conference and here was this man on the platform speaking. While speaking, he saw Kambarami sitting in the audience and he pointed him out and said,

“This man doesn’t remember me, but I remember him. About 15 years ago he tried to sell me a New Testament and when I refused he gave it to me for free, even though I told him I would roll up the pages and use it for cigarettes. He made me promise that before I smoke the pages that I read them.” He went on to say, “Well, I smoked Matthew. I smoked Mark. I smoke Luke. But when I got to John 3:16, I couldn't smoke anymore. My life was changed from that moment.”¹⁵ That is the story that is told by countless numbers of people all over the world.

If this man was willing to read and smoke his way through the New Testament, what are you willing to do? Each week I am going to give you a manageable portion of Scripture to read to help prepare you for Sunday. If you want to smoke it—smoke it—but at least do what this man did—read it first! This week I encourage you to read Genesis 1-11 and Psalm 8, 29, 93, 96-98. The bookmarks in your bulletin can help you follow along.

Starting next week there will be questions that come with the sermon and the questions will center around the following themes. What does this part of the story tell you about God? What does it tell you about God’s people? What does this passage require of you? How does this point us to Jesus? Many of our community groups will be processing these questions. If you are in need of someone to process with, let us know and we will connect you.

Whether you are exploring faith or are mature in faith, we need to walk this road because we are in need of renewal. Renewal will not come to us or to our culture through programs and technique. It will come through being transformed by God’s Word and seeing Jesus as the center of our lives.

Conclusion

When Jesus is at the center you have the answer to life’s big questions—the Bible comes alive—and your life is changed. If God can use a person like Paul, he can use you. But don’t miss what Paul said, “*I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*” It will take effort, but if Jesus is at the center of it all, it will be our joy!

Take the walk with us these next six months. Invite others to join you in this walk. Watch God change your life and the lives of others.

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- ¹Martin Lloyd Jones *Revival* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1987) 13
- ²Mark Sayers *Reappearing Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2019) 55
- ³*Ibid.*, 58
- ⁴Hendrik Berkhof *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962) 28
- ⁵Nancy Pearcy *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 134
- ⁶Sandra M. Gilbert *Death's Door* (New York: W. M. Norton & Company, 2006) 19
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 24
- ⁸*Ibid.*, 24-25
- ⁹Barabara Walters, "Heaven: Where is it? How do we get there?" Tuesday, December 20, 2005, http://www.ctv.ca.servlet/ArticleNews/show/CTVShows/20051130/Barbara_Walters_Heaven
- ¹⁰Randy Alcorn *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004) 88
- ¹¹Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 804-805
- ¹²Geoff Robson *The Book of Books* (Youngstown: Matthias Media, 2015) 17
- ¹³Carol M. Kaminski *Casket Empty* (CASKET EMPTY Media, 2012) xv
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, preface
- ¹⁵Robson, 5-6

