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1 Corinthians

...by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:2

The difficult nature of Paul's words have led many to assume that he is saying:

1. Our continued salvation is dependent on a work of our own will, and
2. That salvation can be lost if one fails to hold fast to what was preached

In other words, this verse is used as a denial of the doctrine of "eternal salvation." This is not the case. As Ellicott notes, "The idea here is not, as implied in the English version, that they were converted, and yet that heretofore no results have followed from their belief..." Rather, Paul will explain exactly what he means in verse 11, which says -

"Therefore, whether *it was* I or they, so we preach and so you believed." (verse 11)

There has been belief and there has been forgiveness because of the gospel message. Paul's intent here in verse 2 is similar in meaning to what he will say in verse 17 -

"And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins!" verse 17

And so the best avenue is to look at verses 1 and 2 together and then analyze verse 2 -

"Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain."

In verse 1, the gospel was preached and it was received. It is also the truth in "which you stand." This is the gospel "by which you are saved." The words "are saved" indicate a done deal. It is the moving from Adam to Christ and the spiritual rebirth which was anticipated since the fall of man. From there it says, "if you hold fast that word which I preached to you." The essence of this difficult portion is speaking of a possibility (not a reality) that someone heard and didn't believe. The message didn't sink into their minds in order for them to "hold fast" to it.

It is being given as a possible scenario for someone who sat among the believers (and he has noted that they "received" the gospel) and didn't bind the truth of the gospel to the saving of their soul. However, for those who did, the gospel is perfectly able to save and keep on saving, "unless you believed in vain." These words are again not saying that someone first believed and then didn't believe. Instead, it is, like verse 17 (cited above), a hypothetical statement. In essence, "yes you believed, but the message that you believed isn't true and therefore you aren't saved."

Paul is attempting to get the Corinthians (and thus us!) to wake up to the fact that our very conduct in the church is to be based on the fact that we are saved. If we are, we have a hope which is grounded in reality. If it is grounded in reality, then we should act as if it is so. Chapter 15 has taken on a new direction, but it is still an orderly move from Chapter 14, which highlighted the disorder within the church.

If we have believed in vain, then our conduct doesn't matter. But we have not believed in vain. Instead, we have believed in the gospel and therefore our conduct should be based on that.

Life application: If you were saved by the blood of Christ, you are saved by the blood of Christ.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 1 Corinthians 15:3

Paul will now review "the gospel which I preached to you" which he mentioned in verse 1. This is not all-inclusive of his teaching, but it is, as he says, what "I delivered to you first of all." This is an idiom which is found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Genesis 33:2 and 2 Samuel 5:8. It is the placing something before other things. His words then are those which are of paramount importance in understanding the work of Christ.

It needs to be considered that this letter is written about 25 years after the time of the resurrection. At this early point in Christian history, these tenets were passed on, understood, and held in the highest regard as points which were to be communicated during a gospel presentation. What he writes here closely matches the words of the Apostle's Creed.

It should also be noted that a portion of what he will state is not recorded anywhere in the gospels. For that reason, he says, "that which I also received." These words are a claim of divine inspiration. This then is what he is referring to in Galatians 1 -

"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ." Galatians 1:11, 12

The first point of his "first things" is "that Christ died for our sins." Christ wasn't just a martyr who did a good deed in giving up his life for another. Rather, He came with the specific intent and purpose of destroying the sinful state in which man exists, and which has been inherited in all men since the fall of man. Christ's death was an atonement for sins committed, and an expiation of those sins, carrying them away, never to be held against His people again. He died in place of us (a vicarious offering) so that we could be reconciled once again to our Creator. In Christ's death, our sins are nailed to His cross and we die to sin with Him. If this didn't occur, then we would remain in our sins; forever separated from God.

This is where the hope begins, and so this is where Paul begins with his "first things." And this death of Christ was "according to the Scriptures." It must be remembered that there was no New Testament at the time of Paul. There were only the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of the gospels may have been recorded, and Paul was in the process of writing his epistles, but none were considered as "Scripture" at this point. Therefore, this is an explicit reference to the fact that the atoning death of Christ is referred to in the Old Testament.

And sure enough, it is found in every type and picture imaginable. It is also found in specific writings such as the psalms and in Isaiah. These truths may have been veiled, but upon completion of His work, they become clearly understood. All of Scripture speaks of the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Concerning these "first things" that Paul speaks of in this verse and the verses to come, the Pulpit commentary notes seven points that are worthy of being repeated here -

1. It is the completest summary.
2. It refers to some incidents which are not mentioned in the Gospels.
3. It declares that the death and resurrection of Christ were a subject of ancient prophecy.
4. It shows the force of the evidence on which the apostles relied and the number of living eye witnesses to whom they could appeal.

5. It is the earliest written testimony to the Resurrection; for it was penned within twenty-five years of the event itself.
6. It shows that the evidence for the Resurrection as a literal, historical, objective fact, was sufficient to convince the powerful intellect of a hostile contemporary observer.
7. It probably embodies, and became the model for, a part of the earliest Creed of the Church.

Life application: Christ died for our sins. Let us not continue to live in sin, but to live in Christ, holy and undefiled.

...and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 1 Corinthians 15:4

The death of Christ is confirmed in His burial, just as it was in the burial of Lazarus. The previous verse noted "that Christ died for our sins." If this is so, then that means He died in a sinless state, because only sinless perfection can take away the sin from one who has sin. This is something that Old Testament writings implicitly demonstrate.

Babies were often sacrificed by pagan nations, and even by wayward kings of Israel, in an attempt to expiate sin. But there is a sure proof that this didn't work; the babies remained dead. If "the wages of sin is death" as the Bible proclaims, then if a baby who was sacrificed for another's sin was sinless, the baby would resurrect. But this doesn't happen. Instead, they bore their own inherited sin from Adam. David notes this in the 51st Psalm -

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me." Psalm 51:5

There is no sinless perfection to be found, even in a mere babe. Thus Christ came, born of a woman, but His Father is God. Because of this, the line of sin was cut;

there was no inherited sin. The God/Man was born sinless and he was born under the law. The record of the gospels shows us that He was not only born without sin, but He lived perfectly and died without sin as well. Only He then could be an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of fallen man. Again, Micah 6 shows us the unacceptable nature of offering even one's child -

"With what shall I come before the LORD,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
Ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression,
The fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul?" Micah 6:6, 7

God would be pleased with none of those things in exchange for the sin of our soul. Burnt offerings of calves or rams are in a different category than man. Oil, even ten thousand rivers of it, cannot carry away sin. And even the "fruit" of our body, meaning our children, are unqualified because of inherited sin. But Christ could and He did. He died and "He was buried," thus providing sure evidence for His death.

After that we are told "that He rose again the third day." The death of Christ was a one-time-for-all-time occurrence, never to be repeated. His death was necessary to atone for our sin. However, just as the burial was sure evidence for His death, the resurrection of Christ is the sure proof that His death was sinless. If "the wages of sin is death" and Jesus had no sin of His own, then it would be impossible for Him to remain dead. Peter explains this in Acts 2, saying exactly that. Death could not hold Him because death had no jurisdiction over Him.

In approval of His sinless life, atoning death, and confirmed death through burial, God the Father raised Him from the dead. It was a one-time-and-forevermore event. The Lamb has overcome. And all of this is, as Paul again notes, according to the Scriptures. None of this was done in secret, and all of this was already

anticipated by the very words which established the law that Christ came to fulfill. These things are revealed in that same law; crying out in anticipation of His fulfillment of them.

Life application: Christ died to take away our sins and to grant us eternal life. The very nature of the transaction shows that it is

- 1) Fully sufficient in and of itself, and
- 2) Eternal in nature. Trust in Christ, rest in Christ, and anticipate in your heart the soon coming again of Christ.

...and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 1 Corinthians 15:5

After the resurrection, and as a proof of the resurrection, Paul now gives (which were at his time still-living) witnesses by name who were trustworthy to speak of what they saw. He says that "He was seen." It is a common word, *ophthe*, which demonstrates that an actual appearance took place; He was literally seen.

First, it is noted that, "He was seen by Cephas." This is the Aramaic form of Peter's given name and it means "the Rock." It is used nine times in the New Testament and only by John and by Paul in their writings. John uses it in John 1:42 when he explains that the name was given to him by Jesus. Paul uses it eight times in the books of 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Including his name in the Aramaic form lends credibility to the testimony because it would have been the common form of address in Israel at that time; Aramaic was the commonly spoken language then. Further, noting him as "the Rock" was intended to show the stability and reliability of his testimony.

It is to be noted that women actually appeared to Jesus before Peter did, but Paul excludes their testimony, probably for two specific reasons. One is that at this time, women's testimony did not bear the same weight as that of men. He is establishing reliable testimony and wanted nothing to interfere with that. Secondly, in the previous chapter, he noted that it was shameful for a woman to speak in church. Should he now designate these women as witnesses of Christ's

resurrection, they may then have been asked to verify that testimony. If a church were to call them for that witness, then it would cause them to violate the very words he had just written. Rather, Paul sticks to witnesses that were culturally accepted as reliable, and also acceptable to be speakers to the congregation.

After noting "Cephas," he then shows that Jesus was seen "by the twelve." Judas was already dead by then, but the term "twelve" is a title designating the office of the Apostles. Thus, it would be better rendered in the capitalized form as "the Twelve." This use of the term is not unique to Paul. In John 20:24, we read this -

"Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."

Judas was dead, and Thomas wasn't around at this event, and yet John calls them "the twelve." Thus, just like the term, "the twelve sons of Israel," it is a designation for the collective whole.

Life application: God's word is sure. It is reliable in every way. If you have doubts about a portion of it, research the matter, praying for guidance. The Lord will alleviate those doubts as you honestly seek to know the truth.

After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 15:6

After noting that Jesus was "seen by Cephas, then by the twelve" Paul gives us words which should be remembered by every Christian willing to defend the truth of the resurrection account. He says, "After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once." This is the only recorded instance of this occurrence in the Bible, but it is of the utmost importance concerning the reliability of resurrection testimony.

Where this occurred is unknown, but it could have been in the region of Galilee where much of His ministry occurred. In Matthew 28:10, this is recorded -

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go *and* tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.'" Matthew 28:10

Wherever it was, it is recorded and therefore it could have been challenged. But even more than that are Paul's next words. Not only was he seen by five hundred brethren at once, but he notes that "of whom the great part remain to the present."

As Paul made this claim, any person who wanted to challenge it could have done so by asking for names or locations. If they did and he declined to give them, the claim could then have been refuted. But no such refutation exists. Further, if he gave a name, that person could have been checked with, who then could have identified others, and so on. If the story weren't true, it would have quickly become evident because lies tend to break down between false witnesses.

In the end, and one way or the other, the truth of this claim would have been easy to determine or refute. If it was refuted, a simple letter would have been sufficient to call the claim out as false. However, there is no record of such a claim. The written testimony of Paul's words, therefore, stand as positive and irrefutable evidence that these five hundred existed and testified to the truth of the account. Not only did the apostles, most of whom gave their lives for the gospel, testify to the resurrection, but so did five hundred others.

Finally, of these five hundred, Paul does notes that "some have fallen asleep." It is another sure testimony to the truth of the account. By noting that "some have fallen asleep," he is granting that a portion of them could obviously not testify any longer to what they had seen. It is another added point of credibility to the claim.

As a side note, the Greek word for "fallen asleep" is *ekoimēthēsan*. It is where the word *koimeterion* comes from, which means "sleeping place." We translate that into the Christian idea of "cemetery." For the Christian, there is no true "graveyard" where hope and life ends. Rather, there is the sweet place of rest until that day when we join Jesus with all our other Christian friends.

Life application: If you have doubts about your faith from time to time, stop having doubts. The word is sure and so is your hope.

After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 1 Corinthians 15:7

"After that" means after the appearance of Christ first to Cephas, then to the twelve, and then to the five hundred-plus brethren mentioned in the preceding verse. At some time after these appearances, He was also "seen by James." This is not James the brother of John, who was already dead by the time Paul wrote this letter. Rather, it is James, the son of Mary and Joseph; the half-brother of the Lord and the leader of the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. He is also the author of the book of James.

Paul notes the following in Galatians 1:18, 19 -

"Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother."

It was probably during this time, when Paul explained his commission to the apostles, that James also told Paul that he had likewise been visited by the Lord after the resurrection. Because of this, he was qualified as an apostle. Like Peter's testimony concerning Paul's apostolic authority, Paul gives the same concerning James here. In other words, the Bible weaves together a solid tapestry which provides us all the assurance that we need to consider it reliable as a witness for the things of God.

Finally Paul notes, "then by all the apostles." All who were considered apostles beyond the Twelve are who this is speaking of. When the visit occurred isn't noted, nor is a specific number given. It is possible that these last mentioned might have been with Jesus at the ascension, thus appearing to them this one final time which is noted now by Paul.

Life application: Paul's careful detailing of who saw Christ after the resurrection is given to bolster our faith. We have every assurance that the account is true and accurate. And so remember where these words are, and be prepared to defend your faith if it is challenged by a naysayer.

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

1 Corinthians 15:8

Finally of those who had seen the risen Christ, Paul notes that "last of all He was seen by me also." There is quite a bit to consider here. First, it demonstrates conclusively that what Paul saw was the same risen body which all of the other apostles saw. If this were not the case, then how could he assert that Christ was actually risen from the dead? He could have been a mere ghost, as was the case with the ghost of Samuel the prophet in the Old Testament. Rather, for Paul to claim having seen the risen Christ, it means that He was truly risen as a Man; it wasn't some apparition or vision. This proves that the claims of cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses - that Christ was raised a "spirit-being" - are false. He was raised in a body, not merely as a spirit.

Having noted this, he then proclaims that this visitation was not at all in a normal way. The term "as by one born out of due time" is insufficient and does not convey the meaning of the original. This makes it seem like the "timing" of his meeting is the main issue. Rather, the "state" of the visitation is what he is relaying. The Greek word is *ektroma* and it is rightly translated as "to the abortive born" (Pulpit Commentary).

This word properly means "abortion" or "stillborn." It is used nowhere else in the New Testament, but the Greek translation of the Old Testament (and other ancient Greek writings) uses it several times to indicate exactly this, a stillborn. This is seen, for example, in Job -

"Or *why* was I not hidden like a stillborn child,
Like infants who never saw light?" Job 3:16

Paul's words indicate his state at the time of becoming an apostle then. The other apostles knew Christ in His earthly ministry and grew in knowledge during that time. They matured in their walk. When the resurrection occurred, they were surprised, yes, but they were also able to process it in a mature manner. Paul on the other hand, saw Christ before he was brought to a state of maturity. Thus, he saw his status as an apostle as one of exceeding unworthiness. As Vincent's Word Studies notes, he considered that he "had the same relation to that which was worthy of the apostolic office which an abortion has to a living child."

We could question then, "How is this appearance and conversion pertinent to us in the church then?" Also, "Why did the Lord choose this manner of conversion for Paul, who is the one to set the parameters for the church age?" The answer to this is found in his words to Timothy -

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting *me* into the ministry, ¹³ although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶ However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life." 1 Timothy 1:13-16

Paul's unworthiness, coming forth to belief as an abortive child, is a pattern to show us that the same great grace and mercy has been poured out upon us. We can look to Paul and see that God truly cares about each of us, sinners though we may have been!

Life application: God called you into His light when you were in a miserable, unworthy state. Live for Him now as one who is purified and holy. Act in a manner worthy of your new position in Christ.