

EASTER IN PROPER PERSPECTIVE  
1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-19

INTRODUCTION

In my opinion Easter is overrated. It gets more attention than it deserves, especially in regard to Good Friday. The resurrection, in one sense, should not come as a big surprise to us.

There are very few of us here who could run our sound and video system. There are very few of us, perhaps just one, who could operate our live streaming system that we have. But for Eric up in the sound booth, it is not such a big deal. Because of his natural ability and his learning, he does it very well.

I took piano lessons for a number of years as a young person. I learned an instrument and played in the school band from junior high through high school and even for one year in college. But then I encountered people who had the ability to play music by ear and to even write music. Don is one of those people. In my limited music ability I cannot understand how they can do that.

Now if you asked me to read something from the Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek New Testament, that would not be a big deal to me. Probably there aren't many here who could do that. But because of my education in graduate school I learned how to do those things.

The point is that each of us have different skills and abilities. Some of those skills are the result of training and education. Some of them are the result of birth and inheritance. Jesus Christ was a human being, but He was also God. Life is at the very core of His being.

(PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:6) In John #14 v. 6 Jesus declared, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”** In John #8 v. 58 (JOHN 8:58) He also said, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”** Abraham lived 2000 years before the time of Jesus, but Jesus declares that He was around in Abraham's day. He uses a present tense verb for “to be” which points to a claim to self-existence. The personal name for God in the Old Testament, YHWH, was based on that word for “to be.” The Jewish leaders who heard Jesus make this claim tried to stone Him. For they recognized that Jesus was claiming to be God. At the heart of this claim is the idea that life is an essential attribute of Jesus Christ. So for Him to rise from the dead is, in a sense, no big deal. He is life. Life is central to His being. But to die, that is the truly amazing thing. That is the mystery.

As Jesus was approaching the end of His earthly ministry, what was He in anguish about? Was it about His ability to rise from the dead? According to Luke #22 Jesus was

praying in Gethsemane just before His arrest by the Jewish authorities. (LUKE 22.14) According to v. 44 of Luke 22, **“And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”** Jesus knew that He was about to be arrested and tortured and killed.

As Christ anticipated His arrest by the religious leaders, what kind of remembrance did He ask His followers to observe? (PROJECTOR OFF) Was it a memorial to the tremendous feat of rising from the dead? No. It was the Lord’s Supper that He instituted--- a memorial observance that focuses upon His death.

What is the proper perspective then that we ought to have on the resurrection? What is the significance of Good Friday and Easter?

I.

Let’s consider first THE GOOD FRIDAY STORY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE GOOD FRIDAY STORY) The first part of 1 Corinthians #15 describes that. You can follow along in the black Bibles on p. 961, as we focus on vv. 3 & 4.

This New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to a church in Greece that was composed of many immature Christians. Some of them were denying the idea that Christians would one day rise from the dead in bodily form. This chapter was written to respond to that. At the beginning of the chapter Paul gives a summary of the Gospel. He describes what an individual must believe in order to be made right with God. I would like to look at three clauses in this summary of the Gospel in order to put Good Friday in proper perspective.

We find the first clause in v. 3. The Apostle Paul writes, **“...Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...”** This is the Good Friday story. The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. In nature he was fully divine. Yet He also became a human being. So He had both a divine and a human nature in one personality. Jesus Christ was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. He was the God-man who lived a perfect life.

Notice also that this clause says that Jesus died. He experienced a real physical death. Verse 4 (1 CORINTHIANS 15:4) adds, **“that he was buried...”** His divine-human personality was separated from His body. This death was accomplished by crucifixion--- probably the most cruel form of execution practiced in that day.

Not only was this a physical death. It was also a spiritual death. The God-man was separated spiritually from His Heavenly Father. On the cross He cried out (MARK 15:34), **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** The amazing Good Friday story is that the God-man, whose fundamental characteristic is life, died.

But notice that it was death for a purpose. Verse 3 in our 1 Corinthians passage says that **“Christ died for our sins...”** The Bible says that human beings have a problem. According to Romans #3 v. 23 (ROMANS 3:23), **“...for all have sinned and fall short**

**of the glory of God...”** The effect of this sin deal is described in Isaiah #59 v. 2. (ISAIAH 59:2) The Old Testament prophet says, “**...but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God...**”

We are all sinners, and our sin has produced a barrier, a separation between God and man. The ultimate result of that, according to Romans 6:23, is death. (ROMANS 6:23) **“For the wages of sin is death...”** Sin is serious. It produces physical and spiritual death.

That is what God taught in the Old Testament. We see a hint of it as early as the time of Adam and Eve. (PROJECTOR OFF) After they sinned, an animal was killed by God to provide clothing for the two of them. In the time of Noah sin became predominant upon the earth. The holy and sovereign God responded by sending a flood to wipe out all of mankind except Noah’s family. Because of man’s sin most of the animal world was wiped out as well. Death came upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the time of Abraham because of the sin of those two cities.

The worship system which God established in the Old Testament also taught that sin is serious and that it produces death. When a person sinned, he or she was to bring an unblemished animal to the tabernacle or temple. He was then to lay his hands upon it and kill it. The priest would then burn it on the altar. It was a divine object lesson to teach the people that the wages of sin is death, and that forgiveness comes only through the sacrifice of a substitute.

There were some sins which were so serious that in God’s eyes there was to be no substitute sacrifice for the sinner. Instead the sin involved required the death of the individual sinner himself. The penalty for murder, adultery, homosexuality, incest, witchcraft, flagrant disobedience to parents, breaking of the Sabbath, and taking the Lord’s name in vain was death of the sinner himself.

Sin is serious. It violates the righteousness of a holy God. It leads to death. That is not the way that our culture regards sin today. Same sex marriage is a legal right, supported by the majority of Americans. Abortion is a constitutional right in many states, including our own. To question it is to deny a woman’s autonomy, the right to control her body.

Sex outside of marriage or before marriage is to be expected. Prostitution is a legal profession in some parts of our state. Pornography is a matter of free speech. It is a harmless indulgence. Smoking pot is now a legal right. It is also treated as a harmless indulgence, no more serious than smoking cigarettes.

And it is all a lie. Sin is serious. It leads to death. It leads to aborted babies and broken families and hurt relationships and self-centered behavior and death. It leads to addictive behavior and physical and emotional health problems.

Sin is so serious that it required the death of God's Son. Only a perfect man could serve as our representative. Only God could give that sacrifice unlimited value. **"Christ died for our sins..."** He paid the penalty for our sins. That's good news. For we are all sinners. Our responsibility is to accept the gift of salvation that He has provided for us. We must trust Him as our Savior.

(PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3) **"...Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures..."** The Scriptures which Paul had in mind were the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. Seven hundred years before Christ the prophet Isaiah spoke of Christ's death for man's sins. In Isaiah #53 (ISAIAH 53:4) he wrote, **"Surely he has borne our griefs**

**and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.**

(ISAIAH 53:5) **But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.**

(ISAIAH 53:6) **All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all."**

The Good Friday story is not complete without an appreciation of the historical setting for the death of Christ. For His death happened at Passover. The Hebrews were slaves for four hundred years in Egypt. God raised up Moses to lead them out of captivity. After ten plagues pharaoh let them leave Egypt. In the tenth plague the oldest son in every family was killed. The Hebrews avoided that judgment by killing a lamb and placing its blood on the door post of their homes. As a result, the angel of death passed over those Hebrew homes.

To commemorate this most significant of Old Testament deliverances the Lord instituted the annual Passover feast. According to Exodus #12 the feast was to be observed on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, the first year in the religious calendar. A lamb without blemish was to be set aside the week before. It was to be tested to make sure that it was without blemish. Then it was to be killed at twilight at the temple or the tabernacle.

Jesus was the fulfillment of that Old Testament picture. He was the perfect lamb of God. He was tested in the week preceding His death as He was verbally attacked and questioned by the Jewish authorities and ultimately by the Roman government. They could not find fault in Him, except that they took offense at His claim to be the King of the Jews. So it was at the time at which the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem that Jesus died. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 27:46) According to Matthew #27 v. 46, **"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you**

**forsaken me?”** Such was the significance of the time of the death of Jesus. The time was the ninth hour, three o'clock in the afternoon when the sacrifices of the Passover lambs were to take place.

This is the Good Friday story. It is Good Friday that provided the basis for man's eternal salvation. That is great news. But it is also a horrible story because our sin resulted in the death of the God-man Jesus Christ

II.

(II. THE EASTER STORY) We come then to THE EASTER STORY. That is the focus of the second part of v. 4 through v. 19. Notice the clause in v. 4 (1 CORINTHIANS 15:4): **“... he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...”** This is the second clause which we are going to examine. What is the place of the resurrection? If Jesus Christ was God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing and never-changing, and whose very essence is life, then rising from the dead is no big deal. But Jesus Christ was also a man, and there has never been another man in history who has risen from the dead of his own accord after being in the grave for three days. The resurrection is a unique event.

It's primary value to us, perhaps, is as an apologetic, a defense, a proof of the gospel. It bases the Christian message on a historical event. Either that event happened, or it did not happen. If it did happen, it is a validation of the claims of Christ. It is a demonstration that He was God. It is a proof that His death paid the penalty for man's sins.

If the resurrection of Christ's body did not really happen, then the claims of Christ are not true. Jesus is a fraud. Paul writes in v. 14, **“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.”** Christianity is not just a good philosophical and religious system. It is a claim to absolute truth. It is based upon historical events--- the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the resurrection did not really happen, our faith is vain. It is useless. It is a waste. The whole system collapses.

In v. 15 Paul says that if the resurrection did not happen, we are liars. We are saying that we saw things that we really did not see. In v. 17 he adds that we are still in our sins. Man's sin problem has not then been solved. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:18) Verse 18: **“Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.”** In other words, Christians who have died have not gone to heaven. Their sin problem is still unsolved. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:19) Verse 19: **“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”** We have been foolish. We have wasted our time. What a stupid thing it is to give of our time and effort and money and sometimes our lives for something that is not true.

But Paul claims that the resurrection is true, and he backs that truth claim up with evidence. In v. 4 he says that the Scriptures predicted it. Psalm 16 v. 10 (PSALM 16:10) says, **“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”** This Messianic psalm predicted the resurrection of Jesus.

Then in v. 5 of 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul begins to count up the people who were eye witnesses of the risen Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF) He mentions Peter, the twelve apostles, and then 500 other followers--- some of whom have already died, most of whom are still alive to verify the story.

In v. 7 he mentions the other apostles and James. Because Paul had already referred to the twelve, he is most likely talking about James the half brother of Jesus who became leader of the church in Jerusalem. James is probably singled out because he had been a skeptic. The Gospels tell us that he and his brothers did not initially believe the claims of Jesus. But the resurrection removed their doubts, and James became a leader of the church in Jerusalem.

The resurrection continues to be a subject of investigation by historians to this day. Simon Greenleaf was a Harvard Law School professor in the first half of the 1800s. (PROJECTOR ON--- A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF EVIDENCE.) He wrote *A Treaty on the Law of Evidence*, which is still regarded by some as the most authoritative work on legal evidence ever written in the US.

In 1846 Simon Greenleaf applied his legal skills to a consideration of the claims of the resurrection. (THE TESTIMONY OF THE EVANGELISTS) The result of his study was a book whose full title was *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*. This was his conclusion: **“It was therefore impossible that [the disciples] could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.”**

Easter is the story of the resurrection. It is a demonstration to the world of the truth of the claims of Christ. He was God who became a human being. He did die to pay the penalty for the sins of the world.

III.

(III. OUR STORY) We come then to OUR STORY the basis of which is v. 8. There is Good Friday. There is Easter. And there is us. Look at a third clause contained in v 8 (1 CORINTHIANS 15:8): **“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”**

Paul says, “If you are not going to believe the testimony of these other people--- if you are going to claim that they were biased followers of Jesus who made up this story, then consider my story. I was a persecutor of these Christians. I took part in putting them in prison and killing them. But the risen Christ appeared to me on the road to Damascus, as I was headed to that city to arrest more Christians. My life was transformed because I had a divine encounter.”

Paul was “untimely born.” Literally the original term refers to a miscarriage, or abortion. Perhaps Paul’s enemies called him that. Elsewhere the apostle says that he was not a handsome man. Maybe his opponents were making fun of his born-again message.

Maybe it was a reference to the fact that Paul had not been with Jesus for three years like the other apostles had been. He became a Jesus follower later than they did.

But Jesus did appear to Paul, and Paul responded to the Good Friday and the Easter story. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Lord Jesus may not have appeared to us in visible form, but we know the basic story. The challenge to us is: What is our story? Have we responded in positive fashion to Jesus and His claims?

Several years ago a young deaf couple appeared in the courtroom of Judge Donald McDonough in Fairfax, Virginia. The couple had fallen behind in their rent because of a decrease in their disability benefits. The judge was unable to arrange a compromise with the landlord. It appeared that an eviction order would be given. The couple did not have the money to pay that back rent that was due. The judge excused himself and went to his chambers. He came back a few minutes later with cash needed to satisfy the debt. He gave it to the couple. They accepted the money and gave it to the landlord. The case was dismissed. (*Washington Post*, 6/10/2000)

The Bible says that we have a debt before a holy God that we are unable to pay. The Son of God became a man and died on the cross on Good Friday to pay the penalty for us. Our responsibility is to accept that payment. If we will accept it, if we will trust in Jesus alone for our eternal salvation, then the gift is ours and our debt is covered. The case against us is dismissed. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans #8 v. 1, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

For those of us who have put our faith in Jesus Christ, Jesus has, in a spiritual sense, appeared to us. We have become an apologetic--- a proof--- of the resurrection. To the nonchristians with whom we work or live or have as friends, our lives are the final apologetic for the resurrection and the gospel. People will be inclined to believe the gospel if they see evidence of it in our lives. That does not mean that we have to be perfect people, but it does mean that we need to be people who are being perfected, who are being changed by the presence of Jesus in our lives. Unbelievers are going to judge the validity of the gospel by what they see in us.

So what is the proper perspective that we ought to have on Easter and Good Friday? Easter is important. We serve a risen Savior. The tomb is empty. But it should not really amaze us that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He was God. His very essence is life.

The truly amazing thing is that He died for us. Death is the complete opposite of the nature of God. Death is the result of human sin, and Christ was sinless. He was a perfect man. He was God. Yet He chose to become our substitute for sin. He was willing to allow the human beings whom He had created to nail Him to a cross. He was willing to experience the agony which resulted in the cry: **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me.”** That death makes Good Friday truly good for us.

A theologian by the name of Erich Sauer summarizes the significance of this Easter season. He says, **“This present age is Easter time. It begins with the resurrection**

**of the Redeemer and it ends with the resurrection of the redeemed. Between lies the spiritual resurrection of those called into life through Christ. So we live between two Easters ... and in the power of the first Easter we go to meet the last Easter.”** We Christians glory in this first Easter, and we do indeed look forward to the second Easter when Jesus will return for us, and we will receive our resurrection bodies. He is risen!