

### ***Of First Importance***

In the name of our risen Savior, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin with a little thought exercise. Imagine taking a piece of paper and writing down on it the four or five things you consider to be the most important in your life. Take a moment to do that in your head. And I want you to rank them so that the first item on your list is what you consider to be the absolute most essential, the second item what falls behind that, and so on down the line until, like I said, you've got four or five things mentally written down.

While you work on that, let me throw out a few ideas that you might want to include on your list. If you are married, you may want to put your spouse on there. And if you don't want to put your spouse on there, then you should probably come see me about some marriage counseling. Beyond your spouse, I'll let you put down family in general. What else? Your career, your home, the family farm, your health; maybe if you're older, retired, and on a fixed income, then your savings and investments might be pretty important to you. Other things: music, sports, some other activity that you are passionate about and think, "If I wasn't able to do this anymore, life wouldn't be worth living."

Okay, does everyone have a short list? Anyone need more time? Raise your hand if you've got it. ... Good. I want you to visualize your list. Look at it. Now imagine taking a red *Magic Marker* and crossing off the last item. Disaster has struck. You just lost whatever it is. It's gone for good. You'll not get it back in this life. Think what your life will be without it. Hurts, doesn't it?

Right. Look at your list again. I'm sorry to say that you're having a *really bad day*. Take that red marker and strike off what's the last item *now*. Disaster has struck again. People are starting to call you Job. Think what your life is like at this point. Try to picture it.

By now you probably know where this is going. So go ahead and do it. Cross off the other items so that only the first item remains. What is it? What is of first importance to you?

I hope, I pray, that it is your Christian faith (or words to that effect like your trust in the Lord or your relationship to God in Christ or something like that). Consider: that's what determines whether you spend eternity in the perpetual joy of the new creation or in the raging fires of hell. Nothing, *nothing* in your life should be more important than that. Nothing in the whole world is worth more than your eternal salvation. That's all Job was left with after he lost everything: his faith in the Lord. And by it he was saved.

Now, it could be that you didn't have your Christian faith as the top item on your list. Maybe you weren't thinking in those terms or just sort of took it for granted. If that's the case, then hopefully it's a lesson learned. You *should* think in such terms, and you should never take your Christian faith for granted. Too many do, and too many let it slip away by neglecting to feed it. Similarly, some of you may have put it down first on your list because here you are sitting in church on Easter Sunday and you knew it was *supposed to be* your top priority – the pastor approved right answer – even if it really isn't and no one would ever be able to deduce it from the amount of time, effort, and interest you invest in it. If so, there's a sermon or two on the subject you need to hear, but we'll save them for another time.

For what follows, I'm going to assume that you agree that your Christian faith is indeed the most important thing in your life. Because what I want to do now is to revisit our thought exercise focusing only on this top priority. The question now is this: What are the most important things concerning your Christian faith? What about your faith matters most?

The reason I ask is because there's a lot out there that claims to be part of Christianity, but isn't. And a whole lot more that is arguably Christian in the sense that the essentials are there, but the priorities are all messed up: what's supposed to be first only gets an occasional honorable mention, and other issues – some good and biblical and others sometimes not so good – get the major emphasis instead.

So, think about it: What is of first importance when it comes to the Christian faith? Is it a general belief in God? Is it becoming a better person? Making moral improvements in the way you live your life? Is it how it makes you feel? The level of enthusiasm with which you worship? The style of music you use in worship? The time you spend in prayer and praise? Is it mission work: winning souls for Christ? Is it fighting poverty, prejudice, and injustice? Making the world a better place to live? Is it learning to love others as you love yourself? Is it upholding the truth and authority of Scripture? Is it receiving the material blessings God promises to give the faithful in this life? Is it finding the special singular purpose for which the Lord placed you on this planet and pursuing that dream for all its worth? Is it trying to run up the points on some divine scorecard so that in the next life you get to live in one of the biggest mansions. Trust me when I say that for each one of these suggestions, there are people out there who honestly believe that's what is most important about the Christian faith. But some of those things are just wrong; others don't really matter at all; and some others, while they're good and worth pursuing, aren't what is of first importance.

What is? The Apostle Paul tells us in today's Epistle lesson. "For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures". That is the foundational truth upon which every Christian and the entire Christian Church stands. It is the shortest summation of what the whole Bible is about: God in love saving a world of sinners by the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of his beloved Son. If you step into a church on any given Sunday morning and don't hear that, don't hear it in the hymns or songs, don't hear it in the liturgy or creed, don't hear it in the pastor's message, then you have good reason to wonder whether you are in church that can properly be called Christian.

Note that twice in this short summary of the Christian faith's most important truth, Paul uses the phrase "*in accordance with the Scriptures*". Understand that what he's talking about are not the New Testament Scriptures that give us the actual accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, and that include his death and resurrection. No, when Paul said this, those Scriptures hadn't been written yet. Therefore Paul is referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, the books of Moses, the books of Israel's history, the prophets and psalms: they all speak of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Christ. Jesus in his ministry fulfilled all that had been written of him long before.

Note also upon which part of the Christian faith's most important truth that Paul puts the major emphasis. It's on the resurrection of Jesus. That he died for sin and was buried, Paul simply states. But that he was raised from the dead gets a long list of eyewitnesses. Paul writes of Jesus, "He appeared to Cephas (that is, to Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive". His

point to his original readers is that if you have any doubts about it, you can go ask any of the people who saw Jesus alive after his death and burial. And to hammer the point home, Paul includes himself on the list of eyewitnesses. His is the most powerful testimony of Christ's resurrection. The others had been followers of Jesus before his death and burial. They were happy to see him alive. When Paul first saw the risen Lord Jesus, he was an enemy of the Christian Church. He was trying to destroy it. He was arresting believers and having them tortured and killed. How does a guy like that go from being the Church's worst nightmare to its most ardent and hardworking evangelist? The answer is obvious: *he met Jesus*: Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, who forgave Paul his sins and put him to work for the Gospel. You'd have an awfully hard time trying to explain the conversion of Paul apart the resurrection of Jesus.

So, why is Paul so emphatic about Christ's resurrection? There are at least three reasons. First, that his resurrection proves that he died for sin. Without the resurrection, one might conclude that Jesus was nothing more than a particularly gifted Jewish Rabbi whose insightful teachings challenged the religious and civil authorities in such a way that they fought back and had him killed. It's the "Jesus was a nice guy" theory, or the "Jesus was a good kind of rebel" theory that are still popular among many even today. One might hold such a view—if *Jesus had remained dead*. But he didn't. He rose from the dead as he himself said he would, *as the Scriptures said he would*, to prove that his death wasn't just an unfortunate miscalculation, but rather the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to redeem his people by sending his Son to die for the sins of the world. The resurrection proves that the atonement Jesus made for sin by his death on the cross is complete and efficacious, that is, by it your sins are forgiven.

A second reason Paul stresses the resurrection of Jesus is that there were some members of the church at Corinth (to which he was writing) who were denying the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. The people at Corinth were Greek. And the Greek culture of the time had long stressed the superiority of things spiritual to things physical. To be sure, they thought of the physical order as being evil. Their hope was to at death escape it and never be troubled again with things like pain, hunger, thirst, or other ailments of the physical body, since pure spirits can't feel any of that. But according to the Christian Scriptures, the physical order is good. In the beginning it was perfect. Humans were created to be both spiritual and physical beings, and to enjoy physical things like eating, drinking, serving, taking walks, holding hands, and other pleasurable experiences I need not mention. True, the world after the fall has problems; but we are looking forward to the restoration of all things, when once again it will all be good.

The problem with thinking that there is no resurrection, no return of the spirit to the body after death, is that the logical conclusion is that even Christ was not raised from the dead. If the dead don't rise, then Jesus didn't rise either. And going back to the first point, if Christ hasn't been raised, then there is no proof that he made atonement for sin. The Christian faith's truth of first importance is denied. And there is no forgiveness for sin, not for you or anyone else. There is no Christianity, no hope for salvation, apart from the resurrection of Jesus.

A third reason Paul stresses the resurrection in Christianity's most essential truth is that it is the guarantee that one day we all will be raised again. Jesus is called the first fruit of the new creation. His victory over sin and death shows that in him all things are being made new. The process has already begun. Even now, because in his death he swallowed up death forever, when someone hears the saving Gospel and comes to faith in him, that person passes from death to life. The new life he or she has in Christ will never die. And in the resurrection

that person will be seated at the great feast described by Isaiah in today's first reading, enjoying a very physical reality: the richest foods and the finest wines. No more tears, no more sorrows or losses, no more sin and its ugly consequences; just endless rejoicing and thanksgiving to God for so great a salvation, and eternal life in the kingdom he has prepared for those who by grace believe this most foundational truth of our faith: "That Christ died for sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." So we preach. So you believe. So you are saved. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen Indeed! Alleluia!]

***Soli Deo Gloria!***