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**"OF FIRST IMPORTANCE"
Scriptural background - 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 50-58**

Introduction

On Easter just before he died Dr. W. E. Sangster painfully printed a short note to his daughter. This deeply spiritual Methodist had been spearheading a renewal movement in the British Isles after World War two. Then his ministry, except for prayer, was ended by a disease that progressively paralyzed his body, even his vocal chords. But the last Resurrection Sunday he spent on earth, still able to move his fingers, he wrote, "How terrible to wake up on Easter and have no voice to shout 'He is Risen!' Far worse, to have a voice and not want to shout."

Across the world on Easter Sunday a shout will be heard by the host of darkness once again striking terror in their ranks "Jesus is raised from the dead." Paul did not doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead for he had testified to this great truth. If anyone should be skeptical about the resurrection of Jesus, Paul should have been. He had committed his life to the destruction of the sect called Christians, until one day the risen Christ accosted him on the road to Damascus and brought him to his knees, where he humbly asked, "What will you have me to do Lord?" This dynamic encounter with the Jesus Christ dispelled any doubt in

Paul's mind that Jesus had raised from the grave. It expunged all trace of skepticism from his thinking. He confirms this in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, "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." He had joined the sect that believed in the Risen Christ and became the aggressive champion of this powerful gospel. The transformation in his life and mission was phenomenal.

It is easy to believe in the death of Jesus, but what about all of this talk of His Resurrection. This is more difficult to accept because it is not common for men to rise from the dead. But look at the record of the New Testament. Feel the excitement of the followers of Jesus who found the tomb empty. Read about those who saw Him after His death on Calvary. Study the reaction of Thomas Christ's own disciple who would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, "Except," he said, "I shall see in His Hands the print of the nails and thrust my hand into His side. I will not believe." And then Jesus appeared to him one day and that meeting brought Thomas to his knees to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus as he confessed "My Lord and my God." "And in this chapter, part of which is the foundation of our message the Apostle Paul brings to the witness stand at least six different witnesses or groups of witnesses. In v.5. He tells us that Jesus was seen by Peter, and then by the twelve disciples. In v.6 five hundred brethren saw him. In v.7 James and all the Apostles saw him and lastly in v.8 Apostle Paul himself saw him in that dramatic encounter on the way to Damascus. There was one thing of which they were sure; that Jesus was alive and they were willing to die for that truth. One has pointed out that "Men do not persist in a lie or even a delusion, if every time they insist on its truth; they are driving nails into their coffins. Men do not invent a story so that they would be crucified upside down, like Peter, or have their heads chopped off like Paul outside of Rome, or stoned to death like Stephen. An illusion may sustain them for a time but not for long. These men and women were convinced that their Lord was alive, and they were willing to die for that conviction." Stanley Jones

wrote, "the early disciples are radiant and irresistible. They laugh their way through persecution, sing their way through prisons, and smile their way through death. For what? A hoax? Well, hoaxes don't produce hallelujahs, nor does body snatching produce transformed lives." It is significant that there is not a single pessimistic note in the New Testament anywhere after the resurrection. The death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ was the gospel the early disciples preached and many died for it... Paul, himself said, that this was his gospel. The death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the grave he presented as of "first importance." To ignore or neglect this vital confession of faith is to deny and destroy the Gospel message. There is no gospel without these truths. To Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead this was the heart of the gospel message and it was of top priority to him.

The question arises as to why this gospel is of "first importance?" It was so because it was announcement of

1. THE DEFEAT OF A FORMIDABLE ENEMY 1 Corinthians 15:55. His words confirm this truth. "Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?" These questions assume what the answer is. It is as though Paul addressing death says "Death you don't have victory neither do you have power any longer, nor are you in control of my eternal destiny. Jesus died and rose again and in doing so removed the sting from death" Because He lives I shall live also. The sting of death (sin) has been removed. Sin and death have been conquered and therefore death you are no longer the frightful enemy of man. The Lord of Life has vanquished your authority and destroyed your power and no longer do you have the final say over the souls of men and women. This is the only message of hope for world.

There is no doubt that inherent in man is the fear of death, because *it is an inescapable fact.* 1 Corinthians 15:55. Death is not something about which we like to discuss. It certainly would not be the most popular subject at a social gathering or party. We are not into talking about death. It is not an exciting uplifting conversation or topic. Regardless of this mindset, death is an

inescapable fact. No matter which way we may turn on life's journey, we will come face to face with it. Death is a fact of life. Man has always been mystified, confounded and even fascinated by the mystery of death. The grave terminates man's ability. Man's control ends at the grave. It is one place that leaves man helpless. There is nothing in his technology or scientific knowledge to help him. Death is the one event where man's ability and power is rendered impotent.

Today society is spending billions of dollars to delay the inevitable approach of death, and it is true that men and women are living longer these days. Medical science as wonderful as it is has only been able to delay the moment of death. It has failed to eliminate it. The only comfort one cynic got out of the fact of death is revealed in his comment "One thing about death, it doesn't get worse every time congress meets."

A little boy had received severe sunburn and it had reached the peeling off stage. His mother heard him saying to himself as he was washing up for dinner. I'm only four years old and I am wearing out already. As the year's come and go we become increasingly and painfully aware that we are wearing out. When man sinned he brought death upon mankind. Paul says in verse 56 "The sting of death is sin." If death was to be rendered impotent to destroy our souls, the answer lay in the removal of the sting, which is sin. This is what Jesus did when died on the Cross of Calvary. Charles Wesley wrote in one of his beautiful hymns, Jesus died to "break the power of cancelled sin and set the prisoner free." When Jesus died for our sins, he died to take the sting out of death. Death being an escapable fact meant that without a way of deliverance from sin, mankind was doomed for all eternity. Jesus died to defeat that formidable enemy. The defeat of this formidable enemy gives birth *to an*
b. Incredible Possibility. It is the promise of eternal life. 1 Corinthians 1:55-56. "Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?" Death has been swallowed up in victory. The victory of the Lord Jesus Christ has devoured the power of death. It has swallowed it up. This metaphor serves to impress upon us that what Jesus did on the cross was overwhelming. God does nothing by

half measures. When Jesus cried out on the cross "it is finished", He secured once and for all and for us, the gift of eternal life. In this passage of scripture Paul is passionately expounding on the incredible possibilities of life after death because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Death no longer holds any fear for him and he tells us why in verse 22, "For since death came through a man (Adam), the resurrection of the dead comes also through the man Jesus. For as in Adam all die so in Christ shall all be made alive." Jesus came to give us heaven. The beloved hymn "Sunset over the Mountains" was written during the writer's meditation on the piano. Sure that its message would catch on Peterson confidently approached the publisher. "We would like to use it", the approving publisher said after glancing over it, "but we have a little suggestion. Can you take out this reference to Jesus and enlarge a little more on heaven." You mean Heaven without Jesus? That was not only unthinkable, it was impossible! Clutching his manuscript, the composer walked from the publisher's office with another song coming on: "I have no Song to Sing but that of Christ my King." Death has been swallowed by Christ's victory on the cross. There is no heaven without Jesus. E Stanley Jones wrote "Before the Jesus rose from the tomb, over the portals of death was written, **"NOTHING BEYOND."** After He arose it had to be written, **EVERYTHING BEYOND."** Resurrection says to us that there are indescribable possibilities of life after death.

This gospel about which Paul wrote is "of first importance" because it *declares that Christ won*

2. THE DECLARATION OF THE FINAL VICTORY. The final victory on the cross was ratified and sealed by His glorious resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15: 22-23, 54 58. Note what Paul says in verse 54, "Death is swallowed up in victory Verse 57, "But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This clearly tells us that the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection has been accomplished. The message of this day in which we rejoice and which we celebrate, is that God is triumphant over power of death and forces of

darkness. **What God set out to do He did.** What we see in an empty tomb is the evidence of

a. *The Invincible Power of God in the living Christ.* 1 Corinthians 15: 54, 57.

“Death is swallowed up in victory. “He give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” These two statements are a revelation of the mighty power of the Living Christ. A. W. Tozer wrote, “The cross is rough, and it is deadly, but it is effective. It does not keep its victim hanging there forever. There comes a moment when its work is finished...After that is the resurrection glory and power, and the pain is forgotten for joy that the veil has been taken away and we have entered in actual experience of the presence of God.” Victory is ours because of the invincible power of God in Christ. This means that men and women can experience and enjoy

b. *The Incomparable Presence of God in the living Christ.* 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, 56. **But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** In verses 22-23 Paul writes, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then when comes, those who belong to Him.” Paul uses his favorite phrase **“in Christ”** to describe the relationship of the believer to the Lord. It is a description of the intimacy of the child of God’s relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 22 tells is that “in Christ will all be made alive.” Because He is alive, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ guarantees His incomparable Presence in our lives. Because Jesus lives we can know the strength of His dynamic presence. **There may be some of us who have yet to experience something of what Dr. Dale of Birmingham England experienced one day in his study when he was writing an Easter sermon for his people. Halfway through his work, the thought of the risen Lord broke in upon him as it never done before. ‘Christ is alive,’ he said to himself. ‘alive’ and then he paused. Alive!’ he cried again, “Living as really as I myself am!’ And he got up walked about, repeating ‘Christ is living, Christ is living!’ It had come upon him with a burst of sudden glory – Christ is risen, and alive. Paul’s declaration of a final victory impresses upon us that we can experience**

the incomparable presence of God in our lives. Paul does not leave us here but moves on to give

3. THE DESCRIPTION OF A FUNDAMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY. 1 Corinthians

15:1-4, 58. V. 2. This responsibility is given each follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain." Paul expands on this in verse 3. "For what I received I passed on to you. There two vital, fundamental and indispensable truths that he passed on to them. The first was the truth of

i. The Death of Jesus on the Cross. V.3. and second,

ii. The Resurrection of Jesus from the Grave. V.4.

In both instances he reinforces these truths with the statement, "according to the scriptures." Christ's death on the Cross and His Resurrection took place according to the scriptures. And Paul says, "You are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you." This why this word is of first importance.

Then in the final verse in this chapter the Apostle writes, (v.58) "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord." The word "therefore" refers back to what he has already said in this great resurrection chapter. Because of what Jesus has done; Because of His victory on the cross and His triumph over the grave, Paul exhorts the Christians to, "stand firm. Let nothing move you." Always give yourselves to the work of the Lord." There are two areas of responsibility that Paul places before the Christians at Corinth, Firstly he says

a. "**Establish Yourselves**" 1 Corinthians 15:2,58. v.2. "**Hold firmly to the word.**"

And in v. 58 "**Stand firm. Let nothing move you.**" The assurance that they can establish themselves and stand firm, lies in the truths that Paul has just described in this chapter. He concludes with the sense of gratitude combined with a deep conviction as is evidenced in his words in v. 57. "**Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**" This victory is stunningly and overwhelmingly convincing. Paul's vivid declaration in verse 54 confirms this truth, "**Death has been swallowed up in victory.**" The power of death has

been destroyed. And Paul unhesitatingly tells us that God gives us this victory through the mighty victor our Lord Jesus Christ. 1: Corinthians 15:57. What greater assurance can we have than to know that Christ's victory can be made real in us? Because Christ our Savior is victor He does not hesitate to tell them to not let anything move them. "Stand firm! Let nothing move you." This includes everything and excludes nothing. When you realize that the early Christians constantly lived under the shadow of death, and faced the pressure of persecution on a daily basis, this is no small directive he gave them. Paul says, in spite of all that you are facing "Let nothing move you." Paul could say that because there was an invincible and inexhaustible power from which they could draw, and on which they could rely, in order to establish them selves. This power of the resurrected Christ was the foundation of their strength, and the source of their courageous steadfast resilience. If the death of cross did not deter Jesus from the fulfilling of the purposes of God for the salvation of the world, then surely we can draw upon the strength that was His. He was immovable and steadfast in His mission to give Himself up as the perfect the sacrifice for the sins of the world. The scripture tells us that He set His face as a flint toward Jerusalem where He would be crucified. The indescribable horror, which only He could know, did not deter Him from carrying out His mission. His love was stronger than death and more powerful than the forces of darkness. Because of this victorious love Paul said "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." Romans 8:37 He is the source of our strength and the challenge and inspiration of our faith. Paul in a similar vein wrote to young Timothy these telling words, "Remember Jesus Christ raised from the deadtherefore I endure everything." His message is clear. The reason that he could endure everything that came his way lay in the power of the resurrected Christ. The writer to the Hebrews wrote that "Christ endured the cross, scorning the shame, consider him who endured such opposition from sinful man, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Hebrews 12; 2-3. Look at Jesus and see what He endured and

let nothing move you. Establish yourselves. Stand firm. Let nothing move you”
Rely on Christ the victor.

There is one more truth that Paul adds in verse 58 when says

b. “Give Yourselves.” 1 Corinthians 15:58. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your Labor in the Lord is not in vain. Note the words “always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.” One has pointed out that that “WORK” refers to what is DONE and it should be done with energy and diligence. The word “Labor” however, refers to the doing of the work; the toil and energy expended in it, the strength devoted to it, and the fatigue resulting from it. Then this labor will not be futile or in vain. (J. Hunter) Paul having established the truth of the resurrection believes that, “such work will be productive and bear fruit now, and earn their reward at the judgment seat. If this labor is done “In the Lord,” it infers that it is under His control, in His strength and for His glory.” (J.Hunter) There are no half measures here. It is significant that Paul having settled on the truth of the resurrection believes that personal service in God’s Kingdom should be the natural out flow of the dynamic power of Christ’s achievement for us and in us. There is implied here that a full surrender to the service of God is the Divine expectation - “Give yourselves” Paul Himself expects nothing less than this. But let me emphasize that this is not the directive of Divine autocrat, but rather a loving God who gave Himself for our redemption. What Jesus accomplished by His death on Calvary’s Cross and resurrection from the tomb, is the basis for Christ’s followers to give themselves to the service of God.

Conclusion

Let me rehearse again the reason God expects us to fully surrender ourselves to Him. First He fulfilled

i The promise of salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. In this verse 3 he says that Jesus died according to the scriptures. And then Paul in verse 4 declared that Jesus had not only died “***according to the scriptures,***” He was raised again

“according to the scriptures.” These incredible events that occurred, took place according to the scriptures. They were a direct fulfillment of the promises of God. The promise of the coming Savior was deeply embedded in the prophetic word, and it had been sounded down through the ages. Now it had been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The promise of salvation had come to fulfillment. But he also points to,

ii. The provision of salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day.” The crucified risen Lord is God’s complete and perfect provision of salvation. This is of first importance.

Paul then highlights

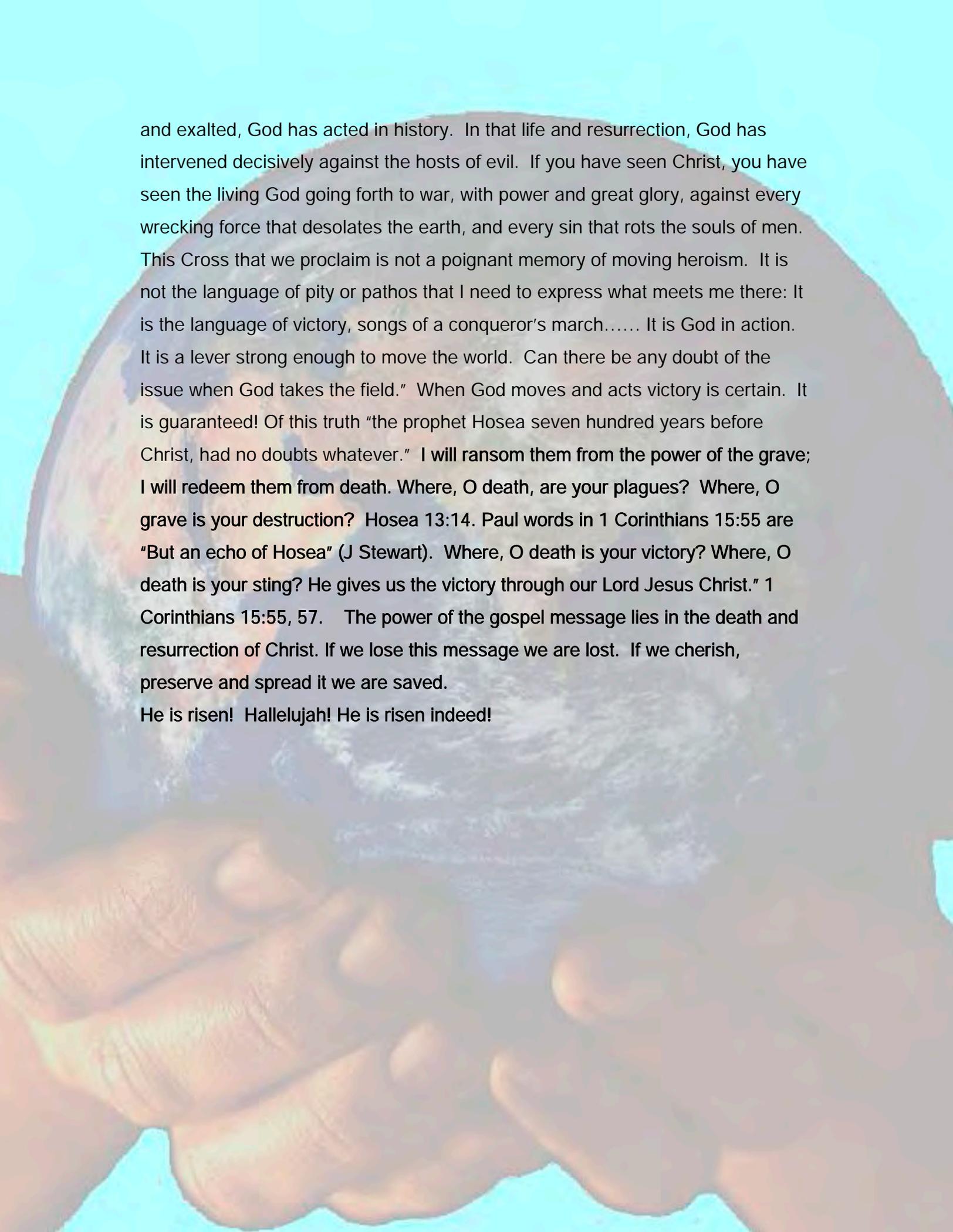
iii. The purpose of salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. The purpose of salvation was to rid us of our sin and give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And the ultimate result of that purpose is that we might have eternal life. The finally he points to

iv. The power in salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:56-57. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the sting of death, which is sin, has been extracted and as a result we can know the life of the more than conqueror in our daily walk with God. Romans 8:37. The mighty act of God in Christ in His death and resurrection reveals His indisputable power over death and sin. “The Gospel,” said Paul “is the power of GOD for the salvation of everyone who believes....” Romans 1:16 There is power in the gospel because of the triumph of the Jesus on the Cross. Paul says in verse 57, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. His triumph becomes our triumph. The power of His victory enables us to live in victory.

And so Paul presents to us that which is of first importance in the Gospel. Two great basic truths are highlighted,

i. Christ died for our sins. 1 Corinthians 15:3. The center of the gospel message is the cross of Christ. Decentralize the Cross and the gospel becomes powerless.

ii. Christ was raised on the third day. 1 Corinthians 15:4. James Stewart in his excellent book entitled walking with God writes “In Jesus Christ, crucified, risen



and exalted, God has acted in history. In that life and resurrection, God has intervened decisively against the hosts of evil. If you have seen Christ, you have seen the living God going forth to war, with power and great glory, against every wrecking force that desolates the earth, and every sin that rots the souls of men. This Cross that we proclaim is not a poignant memory of moving heroism. It is not the language of pity or pathos that I need to express what meets me there: It is the language of victory, songs of a conqueror's march..... It is God in action. It is a lever strong enough to move the world. Can there be any doubt of the issue when God takes the field." When God moves and acts victory is certain. It is guaranteed! Of this truth "the prophet Hosea seven hundred years before Christ, had no doubts whatever." **I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave is your destruction? Hosea 13:14. Paul words in 1 Corinthians 15:55 are "But an echo of Hosea" (J Stewart). Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:55, 57. The power of the gospel message lies in the death and resurrection of Christ. If we lose this message we are lost. If we cherish, preserve and spread it we are saved.**

He is risen! Hallelujah! He is risen indeed!



