

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

Grace

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Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15:8-11

March 1, 2026
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Text

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

I love hearing testimonies from Christians both of how they initially came to faith, but also of how they are continuing to see God at work in their lives. That's why I find baptisms so sweet. And I love reading New Member Info Sheets where people joining the church share their stories. I think we should be sharing with each other what God is doing in our lives regularly. There's also a podcast called *Compelled* where you can listen to Christians explain how God has worked in their lives, if you're looking for more testimonies.

But really the best one of all time probably has to be the Apostle Paul's account of his Damascus Road conversion – the quintessential testimony. It's told three times in the book of Acts. The third time, he shares it when he is being questioned by two government officials – Agrippa and Festus. Here's what he says:

“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make

them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

And as [Paul] was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. (Acts 26:2-26)

It’s a gripping story, isn’t it? But I’ve always been intrigued by that last part where Paul is calmly reassuring Festus that he’s not insane – “I am speaking true and rational words.” And he insists that these things of which he’s testifying to (principally the resurrection of Jesus) were not done in a corner, in a cave near Mecca or a Sacred Grove in upstate New York. Christianity’s not like most other religions where some person had a private vision and then tried to get everybody on board with his supposed new revelation. The Christian faith is based on easily falsifiable public claims, public events, public truths: a datable Roman crucifixion in a specific location under named government officials, an empty tomb, multiple eye-witnesses testifying (with nothing personally to gain and much to lose) that they had seen Jesus in the flesh, including over 500 people who saw him at the same time. I’m struck at how factual Paul’s claim is.

Last week we started into ch. 15 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We're going to linger in it all the way up to Easter. It's all about the resurrection of Christ. And the point that Paul was making last week is that this really, actually happened in time and space and history. It's not a myth, a metaphor, a coping mechanism. It's reality – true and rational and not carried out in a corner. The gospel is not an idea, a notion, a feeling, a principle, an axiom. It's fundamentally a report of an event, an event of epic salvific implications. Christ (the one who fulfills millennia of OT expectations) was crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried in a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and on the third day his body underwent a transformation, came not just back to life but into a state of eternal life – glorified, perfected, immortal.

And in this state the resurrected Jesus appeared to Cephas (a.k.a. Peter), then to the Twelve (minus Judas, of course, and Thomas who was doing something else the first time; cf. Jn. 20:24), then to more than five hundred brothers at one time (many of whom, Paul points out, were still alive and thus could corroborate the story), then to Jesus' brother James (who, during Jesus' ministry did not believe in him, but suddenly became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem; why? seeing your brother who you thought was crazy and got himself executed now back from the dead will do that), and then to all the Apostles (maybe referring to Thomas being there that time?). The word Paul employs in this chain of events “speaks to the objectivity of the appearances: Jesus ‘appeared,’ not ‘they claimed to see him.’”¹ He appeared to Cephas, the Twelve, 500, James...

“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” The resurrected Jesus appeared (same word) to Paul (who went by Saul at that time). It happened on that road to Damascus. It seems that it was a fairly brief encounter. But it was unforgettable and undeniable. Jesus appeared in blinding light. And he verbally identified himself as the Jesus that Saul had been vehemently and violently opposing.

Paul is clearly identifying this encounter as yet another appearance in the line of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. But he acknowledges that his experience is a bit unusual. There was a significant gap (1-3 years) between the Ascension of Jesus recorded in Acts 1 and the appearance of Jesus to Paul first relayed in Acts 9. The word translated as “one untimely born” is a word that usually refers to a “a birth that violates the normal period of gestation (whether induced as abortion, or natural premature birth or miscarriage..., or birth beyond term).”² Paul's birth into the Apostolic circle was not normal. It happened after the initial 40-day post-resurrection/pre-ascension appearances. And Paul, as we're going to see shortly, was not previously a disciple of Jesus. There's no record that he met Jesus prior to his death and resurrection. So as one scholar has explained, “in comparison with the other apostles who had accompanied Jesus during his ministry [Paul] had been born without the due period of gestation.”³ Whether you read this as Paul being a preemie or being born post-term, Paul is acknowledging that his direct appointment as an Apostle by the resurrected Jesus is odd, yet it's still of the same kind as Peter's or James' or the other twelve Apostles' encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

Lastly, “[t]he word *last* [at the beginning of v. 8] indicates that the [post-]resurrection appearances of Jesus concluded with the appearance to Paul.”⁴ Paul is the last person to have seen Jesus in person.

So v. 8 continues the point of the previous verses – that Jesus died a death that fulfilled the OT proto-types and prophecies of a substitutionary atonement on a Roman

cross, that he was buried (he was truly dead), and then that he literally came back to life in an unprecedented way, never to die again. This is an objective fact of history. Jesus appeared to many people, including to Paul himself. That's the emphasis of v. 8 – Jesus physically rose from the dead and appeared to Paul as sure as you are sitting here today or as George Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776 or as Christopher Columbus sailed across the ocean blue in 1492 or as Genghis Khan died in 1227 or as Rome was sacked in 410. It happened.

Now so what? Verse 8 relates Paul's objective encounter with the living Lord Jesus. Verses 9-11 give us the subjective impact of that encounter. The gospel is a report of what God has done in the real world through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul can attest to its veracity. But Paul's not just reporting about some irrelevant occurrence. This event completely upended his life. "Paul speaks about the gospel as something that he has experienced – something that ought to be having an effect on the Corinthian believers. It is not merely an [objective fact]. It is," as one person has put it, "historical news with ultimate personal impact."⁵ That's what I want to focus in on for the rest of our time together. What we're dealing with in the gospel is an objective fact with a subjective effect. In short, what we need to see today from this text is just this: **the gospel of grace can change people.**

Let's pray...

Self-Assessment

The first way that the gospel of grace can change people is by changing their self-assessment. **The gospel of grace can change your self-assessment.**

Look at how Paul describes himself in v. 9 – "For I am the least of all the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." As a result of encountering the living Christ, Paul had a complete mind-shift. Previously he had a very high view of himself. But now he had come to see himself as entirely unworthy. He genuinely sees himself as the least of the Apostles. He doesn't deserve in any way to be one.

While Peter was preaching at Pentecost and being put in jail, Paul was plotting ways to wipe out Christianity. He was the one smugly supervising the stoning of Stephen. He was on his way to Damascus to snuff out any there who had put their faith in Jesus as the Way to God. Paul was a persecutor of the church! And he thought he was doing God a service!

Paul was proud in his previous way of life. He thought he was awesome. He thought he was hot stuff. He thought he was smart. He was an apprentice to a famous rabbi – Gamaliel. He was part of an elite club called the Pharisees. He was religious, but his faith was in himself. He thought he was earning God's favor through his efforts. He looked at the Law and looked at himself and thought he was nailing it. He thought he was a really good person.

But then Paul met the Lord and realized that he was not the Lord. Jesus knocked him off his high horse. Remember, his name was Saul, named after the proud first king of Israel who stood head and shoulders above the others. The new name he took for himself after meeting Jesus was Paul, which means 'small'. His whole self-assessment changed. He realized that all his righteousness was like feces in God's eyes. He hadn't

been impressing God, he had been attacking him, saying, “I don’t need you! Look: I can save myself!” The gospel of a Savior who died for sins and was buried and rose again made him realize that he was a sinner. He couldn’t save himself. All that he once thought of as marks for him he now saw as marks against him (see Ph. 3). Before he met Christ, Paul was boastful. After the ramifications of the gospel hit him, he was bashful. *I’m the least; I’m unworthy; I was a persecutor of the church!* He said in Ephesians 3:8 that he was the least of all the saints, not just the apostles. He confessed in 1 Timothy 1:15 that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

Can you resonate with him? **The gospel of grace can change** your self-assessment. The gospel is not an announcement that you’re a great person who just needs to believe in yourself. The gospel says that you’re so bad that the only way for you to be saved was for the only perfect person in the world to take your sins on himself and die the criminal’s death that you deserve in your place. The cross shows you the horror of your sin against a holy God. The gospel makes you realize that you don’t save yourself by your good deeds. Your good deeds, done apart from faith in Christ, are actually digging a deeper hole for you. You don’t just need help to be better. You need a total swap out. The gospel humbles you, makes you stop pretending that you’re the center of the universe and fall on your face before the Lord. It makes you stop trying to prove your worthiness and acknowledge with along with Paul your utter and total unworthiness.

Have you seen your arrogance and been ashamed of it? Maybe you’re a goodie two shoes who keeps the rules. Have you been honest with the depraved thoughts you keep secret in your head? Maybe you know you’re not perfect, but you’re not that bad. Have you compared yourself with Jesus? Maybe you’re just a thug who’s been running from God in obvious ways. When you comprehend Jesus – crucified, buried, and then risen from the dead and reigning over all – you put your hand over your mouth and repent in dust and ashes and say, “I’m wicked. I’m selfish. I have nothing. I’m sorry. In fact, I’ve been your enemy. Have mercy.”

Status

The gospel can change people’s self-assessment. But that’s not all. Oh no, don’t stop there. **The gospel of grace can change** your status. It makes you realize that you’re a sinner, but you don’t just stay there. The gospel gives you a new status. It’s not something you achieve, it’s something you receive. That’s the significance of the word “grace.” Listen to what Paul says next – “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” Paul didn’t wallow in shame and guilt and self-loathing. He accepted the free offer of the gospel for a full pardon of all his sin. And what’s more: a full crediting of all of Christ’s righteousness imputed to his account! Through no merit of his own, he now knew that he had a new identity. He was in Christ! Paul didn’t mope. He was full of hope. **The gospel of grace can change** your status.

“By the grace of God I am what I am,” Paul says. Who are you in Christ? You can say – “I am forgiven. I am accepted. I am righteous. I am a child of God. I am loved. I am free. I am alive. I am no longer God’s enemy, but reconciled through the blood of Christ. All of this is true of me because I am in Christ.”

Think about what the facts of the gospel imply for those who believe them. As one preacher has put it – “[Christ’s] *substitutionary death* means that Christians need no longer fear punishment for their sins – he has borne the full penalty.... His death enables

individuals to live free from the guilt of sin and to be certain of God's acceptance and approval.... His *burial* means that his death on one's behalf was no mirage and that someone has gone to face the consequences to replace death. His *resurrection* means that death has been defeated – it has been stripped of its power and sting. Christians will ultimately be raised again to new life because of their union with the resurrected Christ.”⁶

A status that has been gifted to you by grace, that you don't have to earn and you can't lose is so amazing. It's more durable than any other status that people chase. It remains true of you even when you still sin. It remains true of you when you are sick and dying and can't perform in any way. It will be true of you after your death and on into eternity. No matter who you may have been or what you may have done, because of the gospel, you can have the greatest status conferred upon you. And it's not a mind trick, it's based on facts.

Paul knew acutely his sin. But he also knew his new status in Christ. Do you? Do you believe that your sin doesn't define you? And any other lesser identity – married/single, mom/dad, American, educated, doctor, lawyer, whatever... – pales in comparison to being a son or daughter of the King of Universe in the Son who took on flesh and lived and died and rose again for you? At dinner recently we were talking about popularity at school and whether people there knew your name. And I was reminded of the early 2000s song – “He Knows My Name.” That song is light on the gospel, but in light of the gospel it's true – God, the Maker of the Universe, and my Father through Christ knows my name! He calls me his own. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me! Such a status far outweighs any high school popularity.

Seeking

The gospel of grace can change your self-assessment. It can change your status. And finally, it can change your seeking. The gospel of grace gives you a whole new drive. If you are willing to acknowledge your sin and then accept his grace that bestows on you a status you could never earn, then there can be a skip in your step like nothing else can give. Fear can't sustain motivation like this. Pride and self-reliance can't inspire this kind of delightful selfless service. Trying to earn your salvation by your works won't be able to produce the kinds of works that free grace can produce. Guilt won't get you going like grace will. It's those who have been forgiven much, who love much (Lk. 7:47).

Notice what Paul says next – “...and his grace toward me was not in vain.” This word ‘vanity’ or ‘meaninglessness’, ‘emptiness’, ‘pointlessness’ is a major theme of 1 Corinthians 15. It occurs a total of four times (v. 10, 2x in v. 14, and v. 58). The fact of the resurrection means that life is not ultimately vain. There is a point, a purpose. And this is true on a cosmic scale and also in one's own personal life. If you know Christ died for your sins, was buried, and was raised to life for your justification, then your life now has meaning and significance and purpose. You don't have to claw out some flimsy meaning that evaporates at death. You're on a trajectory of knowing and glorifying God that goes on into eternity.

The gospel of grace didn't just show Paul he was a sinner. And it didn't just give him a new status. It produced a new way of life in him. The gospel of grace produces faith that unites you to Christ that gives you justification *and* sanctification. He says, “[H]is grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of

them.” I don’t think Paul has some unhealthy competition going on with the other Apostles. I think he’s just stating that the gospel produced in him a relentless desire to go farther and go faster than any of the original Twelve. Read the book of Acts and you’ll see that Paul’s exploits come to dominate the story. He planted churches all over the place. James stayed in Jerusalem. We don’t have accounts of the other Apostles going on multiple mission trips to the far parts of the empire doing the kind of ministry among the Gentiles that Paul did. The dude was a ball of energy for Christ.

You may not be a missionary or serial church planter. You may be a stayer. And that’s okay. That’s actually necessary and what most Christians should do. But **the gospel of grace can change** your seeking too. You’re not seeking fame and fortune. You’re not seeking a small, comfortable life of ease and pleasure. Because of the gospel your life can be set on knowing Christ and making him known, through the local church – playing your part in the body, giving of your time, talents, and treasures, praying, evangelizing, discipling, caring... As one person has put it, “Undeserved, unmerited grace which springs from the free, sovereign love of God alone becomes operative in human life... [and] characterizes all Christian existence.”⁷

Is that true of you? It can be. Knowing that Jesus died for your sins, are you living with freedom and boldness? Are you living life to the fullest? Knowing that Jesus rose again from the dead and promises that if you’re joined to him by faith you will too, allows you to stop living to protect your fragile life and “enables [you] to take risks and to be fearless in the face of death.”⁸ As the song we sang last Sunday said – “No guilt in life, no fear in death. This is the power of Christ in me.”

You don’t have to work to earn your salvation. Jesus did all that work for you. Now you can get to work for fun, because it’s good, it’s right, it’s rewarding, and it’s a delight when there’s no pressure to perform hanging over your head. Would you describe yourself as a hard worker? Is your Christian life lazy or motivated right now? Are you stretching yourself in evangelism? Come on out on Saturday to the senior home outreach. Are you fighting hard against your indwelling sin? Join an accountability group with guys or gals in the church. Are you pushing yourself to think more clearly about the wonders of God’s Word? Jump in with the Bible Reading Plan or the Book Club or join GFC or WTC next year. Don’t you want to see the gospel go to the ends of the earth? Come to the Missions Documentary at Evan and Helen’s house. Don’t feel guilty and grit your teeth. Allow **the gospel of grace to change** your seeking.

We see this principle of grace getting you going in the Apostle Paul, but also in so many testimonies throughout church history. What drove Martin Luther in leading the Reformation – the gospel of grace. What motivated William Wilberforce to work so hard for so many years to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain? It was a grasp of justification by faith alone. What makes you want to be a better child, or spouse, or parent or friend or employee or boss? If you’re doing it to prove yourself, you will either become proud or peter-out. But if you have fresh visions of Christ crucified, buried, and risen for you, you of all people, then you will be motivated to press on. Don’t waste your life doom scrolling. Get going. Living for the one who lived and died and rose again for you is much, much more satisfying than living for piddly pleasures.

Guilt, grace, gratitude. But even this life of gratitude where we put in effort is not even something we do entirely on our own. We are strengthened and sustained by God’s grace operating alongside us. Paul has not given up boasting in order to now boast.

Look at what he says next – “I worked hard... though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” The Father who sent the Son to live, die, and rise again for you, now along with the Son sends the Spirit to indwell you and empower you to keep all these truths in view and live in light of them. As Paul says elsewhere – “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Ph. 2:13). So at the end of the day, you can still take no credit for yourself. It’s all of grace!

Conclusion

Verse 8 highlights that the gospel is not just a nice idea – it’s an objective fact. But verses 9-10 show us that this objective fact has profound effects. **The gospel of grace can change** one’s self-assessment, status, and seeking. If Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, then you’re not as good as you think you are. In fact, you’re as good as dead and needed Jesus to die for you and give you a total spiritual resurrection. And when you believe that, then you receive a completely new identity that is not dependent on your performance but gifted to you. And this new identity sets you on a new trajectory – a life consumed with Christ, and sustained by grace.

Finally, take a look at v. 11. Paul concludes this section by saying – “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” Whether you heard the report of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for the salvation of sinners from me or Peter or Matthew or John, it doesn’t matter. We’re all saying the same thing. Paul’s message was entirely in line with and consistent with the other Apostles’. They all agreed. There are not different Christianities. James and the Twelve Apostles endorsed Paul and welcomed him as a fellow witness of the resurrection (see Acts 15; Gal. 1:18-19, 2:7-9). Peter acknowledged that Paul was writing Scripture (see 2Pet. 3:16).

But if Paul was the last person to see Jesus in person, how do we meet him. It’s is through preaching, the preaching of the apostolic message, found for us in the NT documents. “So we preach and so you believed.” In the preaching of Christ, the Holy Spirit comes and makes Christ visible to the eyes of the heart by faith (see Gal. 3:1). We can hear the message of the gospel of grace and believe it and be changed.

Notice that here Paul indicates that the Corinthians have believed. But he’s reminding them of the gospel that he preached to them (see v. 1), because we need to keep hearing the gospel and keep believing over and over again. We can easily forget and think too highly of ourselves and not recognize our sin. We can find our status in other things. We can get apathetic or caught up in other pursuits. **But the gospel of grace can change** anybody, even someone like Saul of Tarsus. It can change the most hardened opponent of Christianity today. It has changed you, if you’re a Christian. And it can continue to change you as you continue to hear and believe it.

Lord’s Table

That’s why we’re here today, to hear the preaching and to see it, smell it, touch it, taste it at the Lord’s Table. God uses this physical experience to powerfully remind us of the physical realities that God the Son took on flesh and blood that was broken and shed for our sins on the Cross, buried in a dark tomb, but then came back together again and walked out, appeared to multitudes of people, ascended to heaven, appeared one last time to Paul, and is present with us by his Spirit right now sustaining our faith by his grace until he comes again to bring final Judgment which we will be spared of because he bore

our Judgment already. And we will live forever in resurrected bodies like his with him in unimaginable bliss.

Benediction

May you have Paul's single-minded purpose and passion, not accounting your life of any value nor as precious to yourself, if only you may finish your course and the ministry that you received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" for his glory (Acts 20:24).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, March 1, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 301.

² BDAG, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1957]), 311.

³ A quote attributed to either George W.E. Nickelsburg or C.K. Barrett in Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 297.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 306.

⁵ Stephen T. Um, *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1211.

⁸ Um, 262.