

CHRIST, THE FIRSTFRUITS
1 Corinthians 15:20-23

Intro: Twice a year the world has, in the past, turned its attention to three major events in the earthly life of our Lord. At Christmas the birth of Christ is remembered. At Easter, which is today, thoughts are turned to the death and the resurrection of our Lord. I repeat the words "in the past" because all of that has changed. Gradually our country has become more and more secularized, and these days, which in the past have held such significance, have lost their significance for most of the world. Now at Christmas we think about more about Santa Claus than we do about the birth of the Son of God, and on this day, Easter, we are more occupied with Easter bunnies and Easter egg hunts more than we are about the crucified and risen Savior. I remember the comment of a woman, I think it was last Christmas, who was complaining because she said that there were always people who were trying to bring religion into Christmas. I suppose she and millions of other think the same way about Easter Sunday.

As a child I remember that these were two days were when churches would be crowded with people. That day is past, and we may never see days like that again unless the Lord is pleased to give us a real awakening. As a nation we are becoming more and more God-less, and that is the main reason we have the terrible moral and social problems that we have. We cannot leave God out of our lives and still expect to enjoy the blessings we have had in the past. American is not only changing; America has changed--not for the better, but for the worse!

This is what makes the teaching of the Word of God that much more important. It is only when people are exposed to the Word of God that it is possible that their eyes will be opened to see and understand the truth. And so we are not going to go along with the world, and, unfortunately, with many churches, in turning away from Christ. We want to know Him better, and walk more faithfully in fellowship with Him, in order that people in the world will be awakened to the truth. And so we turn again this morning to the infallible, unchanging, living Word of God, to learn what we can about the death and resurrection of our Lord.

My text for today is found in the fifteenth chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, and I would direct your attention to verses 20 through 23. (Read.)

This chapter is usually called the resurrection chapter. If you were to read it through, you would see why it is given

that name. It deals with the subject of resurrection from start to finish. Paul was able to tell the Corinthians things about the resurrection which had never been revealed before. It became a vital part of the future hope of the people of God. The Old Testament people of God believed in resurrection, too, but God waited until the New Testament was written to give a more complete revelation of this truth. We know that Abraham believed in resurrection. We know that Job believed in resurrection. We know that David believed in resurrection. It seems that Jonah certainly believed in resurrection. And as precious as it was to them, they did not have the details which we have been given since the Lord Jesus Christ was here on earth.

One significant thing about the doctrine of resurrection in the NT is that it is related to the resurrection of Christ. Paul had hardly gotten into this chapter before he declared that "Christ rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4). He was showing that the resurrection of Christ was a major part of the Gospel. If Christ was not raised from the death, then there is no Gospel. There is no salvation. And we who believe in Christ are the most pitiful of all human beings. Notice what Paul wrote in verses 16 through 19. (Read.)

How thankful we can be that he could go on to write what we read in verse 20.

Now we need to be clear on what we mean by the resurrection of Christ. We are not simply saying that He simply lives on in the hearts and memories of those who trust in Him. We are not saying that He passed out on the Cross, and was later revived, and that His disciples called that a resurrection. We are speaking about that which followed His death on the Cross. He was raised bodily from the death. The Roman soldiers had no doubt in their minds but that He died on the Cross. Neither did Pilate. Nor did His followers. They were all rightly convinced that He died. His resurrection followed, and the Lord Jesus went back to heaven in a body!

I hope we all understand this. The world may scorn it, but let it scorn. The bodily resurrection of Christ is as well established in history as any event can be.

So, when we turn to the Word of God, the question is not, where are we going to find something about the resurrection of Christ? It is all through the Scriptures. And so the question is, which, out of the many references, does the Lord want us to consider?

I think I have the mind of the Lord when I say that I want

you to notice that two times in the verses of my text the Lord Jesus Christ is called, "the firstfruits." You will see it in verse 20, and again in verse 23. (Read.)

If there is a difference between these two verses, it seems that verse 20 has to do with the people of God who had already died, back as far as the beginning of the human race. Verse 23 speaks of those who were alive when Paul wrote this epistle, and would therefore apply to all living believers. It applies to all of us who know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. He is "the firstfruits" for us. "Christ the firstfruits." Let me examine those words for you.

In the first place, then, notice the name, or title, which Paul gave to Jesus of Nazareth. He called Him:

I. "CHRIST" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

Have you ever noticed how many times Paul used that title here in 1 Corinthians 15?

He used this title, or name, for our Lord 69 times throughout the epistle, and 15 of them, almost a fourth, are here in chapter 15.

What does **Christ** mean?

Most of you know that it is the NT equivalent of **Messiah**. It means that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. And Messiah, or Christ, means, the Anointed One. He was anointed by God to come to earth on a mission which was fulfilled in His death and His resurrection. He is the One Who was the primary subject of OT prophecy. He was the long-awaited Redeemer. He is the One Who was typified in the animal sacrifices which the people presented to God. He is the subject of such passages as Psalm 2 and Isaiah 7, 9, and 53, just to mention a few of the many that could be mentioned. He is the One Who was promised to Abraham, and to David. In fact, all of the people of God in the OT waited expectantly for Him to come. Priests were anointed, and kings were anointed, but none had the anointing of Jesus of Nazareth. The responsibility for the salvation of sinners was placed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and only upon Him.

But we also learn that by the usage of this name in the NT that it meant even more than just an anointing. In John 20:31 we read these words following John's reference to the miracles which our Lord performed. He performed far more than are recorded in the Gospels, but John explained why he had chosen the miracles that are included in his Gospel:

But these are written, that ye might believe

that Jesus is **the Christ, the Son of God:**
and that believing ye might have life
through his name.

Earlier when Peter made his great confession concerning who the Lord was, he said this: "Thou art **the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (Matt. 16:16).

So it seems clear that the apostles associated the idea that our Lord was the Christ with the equally important truth that He was the Son of God.

Therefore, we must realize that when Paul spoke of Christ, He was not only saying that He was the Messiah whose coming was prophesied in the OT, but also that He was not just a human being (although He was a man). He was, and continues to be, the Son of God!

And so, when you read about "Christ" in the NT, always remember that it speaks of a Man, anointed by God for a special mission, Who was also "the Son of the living God." This is Jesus of Nazareth Whom Paul called, "Christ, the first-fruits."

Now let us consider His full title which is given here:

II. "CHRIST THE FIRSTFRUITS" (1 Cor. 15:23).

Hopefully we understand now the meaning of the title, or name, "Christ." But what did Paul mean by "firstfruits"?

In answering this question we need to go back into the OT because this is a name which comes from one of the annual feast days of the children of Israel when they were living under the Law.

The first time this word occurs in the Bible is in Exodus 23:16. The second is in verse 19 of that same chapter. (Read.)

It had to do with the time of harvest for the children of Israel. In Ex. 34:22 it is called "the firstfruits of wheat harvest, which they were told again in verse 26 to bring into the house of the Lord.

What it meant was this? They were to bring the first sheaf of wheat from their harvest and present it as an offering to the Lord. And it was called "the firstfruits" because it was only the beginning of the harvest. There was more to come! And, like the tithe which they brought, the offering of the firstfruits was an indication that their whole harvest

belonged to the Lord.

Now let's apply all of this to our Lord who is called "the firstfruits."

You will notice in 1 Cor. 15:20 that our Lord is called "the firstfruits of them that slept." Anyone who reads the Bible knows that death is often described as sleeping. So this expression means that the Lord was the firstfruits of those who had died. But how could the Lord be the firstfruits when He was not the first one to be raised from the dead? This is what the expression seems to mean, that no one was raised from the dead before He was. But we know that He raised the widow's son back to life. He raised Jairus' daughter back to life. And He raised Lazarus back to life. We also know that some of the OT prophets were able to raise the dead. So our Lord was not the first to be raised from the dead.

But this is what we do know: We know that our Lord was the first to be raised from the dead never to die again! Let me read to you from Rom. 6:9 where we have these words:

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead
dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.

Two other expressions in the NT teach us this same wonderful truth:

- 1) In Col. 1:18 our Lord is called, "the firstborn from the dead."
- 2) In Rev. 1:5 He is called, "the first begotten of the dead."

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ was just the beginning of a great harvest which is yet to come. That harvest is the resurrection of all who have died having trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. You see, the widow's son died again. Jairus' daughter died again. Lazarus died again. But that is not the case with our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor will it be the case when our Lord comes, and the dead in Christ will rise first. They will be raised never to die again. They, too, will have a resurrection body just like the Lord had when He was raised. And if the Lord should come before we die, we will be caught up to meet the Lord with glorified bodies, and we will not even experience physical death once.

Cf. Phil. 3:20, 21.

Just as with the firstfruits of the OT, Christ the firstfruits speaks of the fact that there is more to come, more who will be raised as He was raised. In fact, it not only speaks of it; it guarantees it! And what is equally precious

for all of us to know, we learn from Christ our firstfruits that just as that offering in the OT indicated that the people were giving their whole harvest to the Lord, so Christ's resurrection indicates that all of us belong to the Lord. And this is the meaning of the last words in 1 Cor. 15:23, "Afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." This includes all of us who know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. You see, we are Christ's. God has given us to Him. And He is not going to give up any of us. And when He presents us to the Father, we are going to be like He is with a body like He has.

Concl: But before you take comfort from these truths you need to make sure that the Lord Jesus Christ is your Savior. Is He your Savior? Are you sure that He is? Has He changed your life?

What a tragedy that most people know more about Santa Claus and the Easter bunny than they do about the Lord Jesus Christ! As one writer said, most people live like there is no judgment coming, and no eternity. But there is a judgment coming, and there is an eternity ahead. And the only way we can be sure that we will have a place in heaven is if we have trusted in Jesus Christ, Who died on the Cross, to forgive us of our sins, and to take them away.

For those of you who have trust in Christ for your salvation, and who do know Him as Savior, let me close by pointing out to you that in 1 Corinthians Paul called Christ "the power of God, and the wisdom of God." He called Him, Christ our Passover who is sacrificed for us. He called Christ the Rock, and said that Christ is God, that He is the Lord. And all of these titles are full of blessing for us. But I hope that you have come to understand what it means to you that Christ is our firstfruits. His resurrection was the first of its kind. It guarantees that we will also be raised and glorified. And a great part of that truth is that we belong to Him. He dedicated us to God by His resurrection from the dead. Let us worship Him today because He died for us, and because He was raised for us, and because He is awaiting that wonderful day when He will come for us. Let us be looking for Him, and loving His appearing.