

THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL
1 Corinthians 15

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Friends and neighbors had simply regarded them as completely ordinary. Nothing seemed unusual about these two bachelor brothers, sons of a United Brethren bishop. They were quiet, well-dressed, hard-working, and actually they were polite to a fault. Two bicycle makers by trade – from Dayton, Ohio.

It was December 17, 1903. They were trying to make history. They were trying to finish their experiments and get home for Christmas. The salty, cold winds were coming off the ocean. Oh, you could both taste the salt, and feel the cold in your bones. Don't misunderstand, they were happy about the wind – the wind and the soft sand banks were the reason that this site had been selected. Only after studiously pouring over the average daily wind velocities recorded in over 120 weather bureau stations had it been decided to come to this sandy spot which boasted of the sixth highest wind velocity in the United States. They had never heard of the place before, but if it had wind and sand – that was all they needed to know.

The location could not be reached by land, for no bridges crossed the inlets or the sounds. The problem was that they had to find someone who both owned a boat and had heard of the sleepy little fishing village which was inhabited by just a few families. It took three days to find him, but Israel Perry was that someone. Perry's boat leaked like a rusty bucket and frequently dipped water. But by constantly bailing, the brothers managed to finally reach the sandy shore of their destination.

The wind was there just as the weather reports had prophesied, but so were the black flies. One of the brothers recorded in his diary, "They chewed us clear through to our underwear and socks!"

If the flies were plentiful – so was the beauty. The sunsets were the most stunning that they had ever experienced. The clouds light up in a crimson prism in the background with deep blue clouds of various shapes fringed with gold.

Though they were friendly all right, the locals were perplexed by these brothers, these two Yankees who came to their little village at the worst time of year – at the very onset of the winter storm season. And this contraption that the brothers were building was even more of a mystery. I mean, the locals were a practical, hard-headed lot who believed in a good God, a hot hell, and more than anything else, "That the same good God intended for man to keep his feet on the ground!?"

It was perfectly silly, was it not? To think that these brothers were spending all of this time trying to get man to fly. Birds fly, God gave them wings. Men ought to walk, God gave them feet. Even

the greatest minds could not dream it possible – why should anyone pay any attention to a couple of bike peddlers?

University of California professor Joseph LeConte wrote in 1888 that flying would never be possible because (1) "There is a low limit of weight (about 50 pounds) beyond what it is impossible for an animal to fly. (2) The weight of any machine constructed for flying, including fuel and engineer, cannot be less than 300 pounds. Therefore, is it not demonstrated that a true flying machine, self-raising, self-sustaining, self-propelling is physically impossible?

Even Thomas Edison wrote, "It is apparent to me that the possibilities of the aeroplane have been exhausted, and we must turn elsewhere."

Besides, Samuel Pierpoint Langley spent \$70,000 on an attempt to fly just two weeks earlier. He worked for the Smithsonian Institute. He failed. It was his last attempt.

Neither of the brothers had more than a high school education. And only \$1,000 to invest in their flying machine – transportation to the site, Kitty Hawk, included.

But their dream would never go away. Oh, they were often frustrated to be sure and more than once they thought about throwing in the towel. But making bicycles was just a means of making a living so that their dream would stay alive.

The dream was birthed when they, as children, opened their father's Christmas present to them. Unlike most presents, which lie still when they are opened, this one ascended to the ceiling. It was a toy helicopter made by French inventor Alphonse Penaud – twin propellers powered by a twisted rubber band. "I have been afflicted with the belief that flight is possible," Wilbur Wright told his father.

December 17, 1903, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

The brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright, were ready to, for the first time, see their dream literally fly or crash.

They had made the engine – they had pioneered the shape, size and mechanics of the propeller. When nothing else would hold the propeller in place, they used their "fix all" bicycle cement.

Few witnesses were gathered for the historic event – but no newspaper was interested enough to make the trip for the occasion. The world was in its natural busyness, unaware that anything of any importance or magnitude was taking place. But there were some witnesses. John T. Daniels, a local, was there – he had seen the Wright's signal flag that notified the locals that the two Yankees were about to actually try to fly. Along with Daniels were Willie Dough and Adam Etheridge. Two other people just happened to be on the beach that morning – what a morning to just happen to be on that beach. William C. Barkley, a lumber buyer who was hoping to salvage some wood from a shipwreck, and Johnny Moore, a 16-year-old boy. The five would be the sole witnesses of the day's momentous events!

Daniels – who had never taken a photograph in his life – was placed in charge of taking the picture – of squeezing the rubber bulb precisely when the plane was at the end of the launching track.

Orville and Wilbur were dressed in their usual attire. Even with all the mechanic duties and the sea and sand, Wilbur and Orville always wore a business suit – starched collar, necktie and cap, unthinkable to modern, casual America.

The wind was perfect, the flyer was supposed to be ready. They had calculated on paper over and over. But it was time to get off the paper and into the air –

10:35 a.m. Orville at the controls – his life is clearly on the line. He was chosen by the mere fortune or misfortune of a coin toss, at this point they were not sure. There could be no hedging. Orville would have to lie flat, placing all of his weight upon the plane. He was life and limb committed to the moment. Wilbur in place to run alongside the right wing, fussing over a few last minute adjustments.

The years of dreaming were over. The time had come to test their dream in the harsh and unforgiving laboratory of the sky.

The question that gripped everyone's heart – will it fly? The plane, consisting of wings of cotton and wood, rushed down the skid track made of four 15-foot long 2x4's. Will it fly?

The Wrights counted on the flying machine. Especially Orville. He was committed. There was no other way once the engine was propelling him down the track. He had followed carefully the experiments of other would-be flyers. He knew that men had both crashed and died.

Have you ever placed yourself in such a vulnerable position? A position where you were counting on something in a really big way? Something or someone upon whom you had placed your whole weight as you pondered "Will it disappoint me?"

There will be a time in your life if you are a Christian that you will be called upon to cast your whole weight upon the Gospel story, upon the story of Jesus. You have heard this story about the man named Jesus, you have heard that He was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, was crucified upon the cross as a sacrifice to God for our sins, that He was resurrected the third day, ascended to the right hand of the Father, and that He is coming again for His own. You have perhaps been curious about that story. Maybe you have heard the story so many times in so many ways that it has ceased to grip you with its power. But some day you are going to be called upon to cast your weight upon that story and you, like Orville Wright, are going to commit yourself life and limb to the story and you are going to wonder "When I really need it, is the Gospel going to Fly?"

Perhaps it will be a painful divorce that will cause you to cast your weight upon the Gospel, perhaps it will be a layoff notice at work, perhaps it will be conflict or sickness in your life. Or perhaps, as in our text this morning, it will be the death of a husband, a wife. The loss of a parent or, most painful of all, the death of a child. What will you do? Life has been forever changed by the harsh, cruel blow of the unwelcome powers of death. You will be called upon to cast your full weight upon the Gospel. Will the Gospel disappoint? Will it leave you abandoned and hopeless? Or will the Gospel deliver the hope, comfort and peace, the "GOOD NEWS" that it promises?

What about the promise of the resurrection? Of life eternal? Will the Gospel hold up?

As we look at Paul's Letter to the church in Corinth, we learn many things about the Gospel story and its importance.

I. If the Gospel fails us, we are without hope.(13-19)

Perhaps you have heard someone say, as people often do, "If there is no eternal life, I'm still glad that I followed the Gospel." As if they are not quite sure about this "resurrection thing." An attempt to hedge their bet, to limit their losses. No, says Paul, if the Gospel story is not true, then those of us who have placed our hope in, and cast our weight upon, the Gospel are a people to be pitied. (19)

Paul is not hedging his bets when he accepts the Gospel story to be true. For him it was a radical reversal in life. To move from the zealotry of a Pharisee who persecuted the church to one who would eventually have to abandon his own life in order to proclaim the Gospel. For Paul, the modern category of "the Gospel is not so bad even if it's not really true" would have no place in his mind. Paul wanted to follow the workings of God in history. If God was working in and through Pharisaic Judaism, as Paul previously thought that God was, then Paul would cast his weight in that direction. But now, having once seen the resurrected Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul would now cast his whole weight upon the Gospel story, upon the resurrection of Christ. Like Orville Wright, rushing down the skid track upon the first ever airplane, Paul had committed himself literally life and limb to the Gospel. And you have to if you are a follower of Christ.

Notice:

A. Verse 17 – If the Gospel is not true, those who are alive are living life with the full burden of their sins.

No forgiveness, no freedom, no release. If the Gospel disappoints you, then God has never forgotten your sins. You can no longer live life basking in the sunshine of the forgiveness of God. Rather, you must live life under the cloud, under the darkness of the comprehensive weight of your sin. Forgiveness has been a hoax, freedom has been illusion, for you are still held captive to the power of your sin.

B. Verse 18 – If the story of the person of Jesus is not a real story, then those who died with faith in the Christ story have perished.

Make no mistake about it Paul says, our only source of hope is the Gospel. Those stricken by the power of death – your husband, your wife, your child, your parent, your brother, your sister, your grandparent – those who cast their weight on the Gospel story – have indeed simply perished if the story of Jesus is not accurate.

A psychologist remembered the death of one of his colleagues on the staff of the Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. The man who had passed away had served on the university medical

faculty for more than 25 years. During his tenure as a professor he had earned the respect and admiration of both professionals and patients. The doctor had reached the pinnacle of success in his chosen field and had reaped many financial rewards that accompany such accomplishment. He had tasted of everything good by the standards of the world. At the next hospital staff meeting following the physician's death, the chairman invited to entire staff to stand, as was their custom for such situations, for one minute of silence in memory of the dead colleague. The psychologist wrote, "I have no idea what the other members of the staff thought about during that sixty-second pause, but I can tell you what was going through my mind. I was thinking, 'Lord, is this what it comes down to? We sweat and we worry and labor to achieve a place in life, to impress our fellow man, we take ourselves so seriously, overreacting to the insignificant events of each passing day. Then finally, even for the brightest among us, all these successes fade into history and our lives are summarized in a five minute eulogy and sixty seconds of silence. It hardly seems worth the effort, Lord.'"

The psychologist was struck by the collective inadequacy of the staff to deal with their colleague's death. Where had he gone? Would he live again?

Without the resurrection of Christ, those who have placed their hope in Christ have perished, for theirs was a misplaced hope.

C. Verse 15 – If this story about Jesus is not true, then we, Paul and us, have made God out to be a liar. For we have claimed that God was working his eternal plan in the person of Christ. But if God was not the author of the Christ story, then we have false witnesses against God himself.

For Paul, there was no hedging the bet, no riding the fence. He had declared that God had acted in the person of Christ, especially in his death and resurrection, and if God was not behind the happenings in the story of Jesus, then Paul said we have misunderstood the work of God, missed the mark entirely. We are trapped by our sins, doomed to simply perish as we grasp our hollow, failing Jesus story at our death.

Verse 18 - "Asleep in Jesus," Paul tipped his hand.

II. But give thanks to God that indeed the Gospel will not fail us because:

A. It is the plan of God (All has happened according to the Scriptures). (Romans 1:16)

15:3-4 – "According to the Scriptures"

Paul was a Jew. A good student of the Jewish Scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament. As we read his letters it becomes evident that never far from Paul's mind was the Scripture. One of the reasons that Paul was sure that the story of Jesus would not fail those who are counting on it as the source for eternal life was that the Old Testament pointed to Jesus as both sacrificed and resurrected Messiah. The Jesus story was not independent from Judaism. Rather, the story of Jesus was a continuation of, yes even the climax of, the story of the Jews, God's covenant people. All was done according to the Scriptures. The prophets had seen the story of Jesus long before and now what had been a promise before had become a reality in the person of Jesus. Paul had

confidence in the story of Jesus because he had confidence in the Jewish Scriptures which pointed to a suffering Messiah, a lamb who would take away the sins of the world.

We, too, can take confidence in the Jesus story, precisely because it is a continuation of the working of God with humankind, because Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets.

B. Eyewitnesses give testimony. (Vs 5-8)

Like John T. Daniels...

Paul calls upon the Corinthians, Paul calls upon us, to have great confidence in the Gospel story because of the presence of eyewitnesses.

The story really is difficult to believe. Perhaps you have heard it so long that the claim of the Jesus story has been lost on you. The story claims that a dead man lived. That a rabbi by the name of Jesus, who had followers as would any good rabbi, was crucified as the son of God and that He was made alive again, in bodily fashion, from the dead. That is a very difficult story to accept. Even His own disciples refused to accept it, until the evidence was overwhelming.

But you can believe, says Paul, because there are many eyewitnesses to testify to the resurrection. Their testimony harmonizes in such a powerful symphony that they will not be silenced. They saw Him. No one could take that away from them. They had seen the empty tomb. They had seen the risen Lord. He had eaten a meal in their presence. They had touched his wounded hands, brushed up against his pierced side. Though skeptical before, especially James the brother of Jesus, they had seen Him and He was alive. At first, the men tried to brush off the reports of the resurrection as the mere gossip of excited women. While God had chosen women to be the first to witness the risen Lord, finally the men saw Him, too. When Paul writes this letter to those in Corinth, most of the witnesses to the resurrection are still alive. Go ask them, Paul says, they will testify He is alive, He is alive indeed. There was no mistake: Peter saw Him, all of the apostles saw Him, more than 500 people saw Him at one time, James saw his brother alive. And don't forget I saw Him, too, Paul says.

The witnesses testify with a voice so strong that even today the echoes are heard, "He is alive."

C. The Resurrection of Christ gives us assurance. (Verses 20-26)

Paul gives us a final reason to take great confidence in the hope of eternal life as promised by the Gospel story.

Christ himself was resurrected. Our resurrection is just as certain as was the resurrection of Jesus. Paul understood the resurrection of Christ in cosmic terms. With the resurrection of Christ, God began the age of the resurrection of the dead. What God started, God must finish. The defeat of death had been inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus, it must be completed by the resurrection of all of His followers. The chain of events had begun in the resurrection of Christ, and that resurrection, like our own, demonstrated the authority of God over all things, especially the final

enemy: death. Christ's resurrection demands our resurrection; otherwise, death has not been defeated and God is not all-in-all.

This is a passage of epic grandeur. It decries the fact that some believers in the city of Corinth were teaching that there was no resurrection from the dead for those who had died before the return of Christ. Theirs was an inadequate view of the sovereign Lord of history. Paul explains like the first fruit of a harvest is a pledge of the full harvest to follow, just so, the resurrection of Jesus serves as a pledge from our God that a full resurrection of His disciples will follow. Yes, we can place our faith, life and limb, upon the Jesus story because it is guaranteed by God Himself.

As death came through a man, so life came through a man, to those (v. 18) who are asleep in Jesus.

He is alive, He is alive, He is alive.

Look closely, really closely, you can still see their footprints in the Carolina sand. Orville is lying with his full weight upon the air machine, Wilbur is shuffling beside, bickering over last minute adjustments to the controls. What was Orville thinking about as the noisy, hot engine was smoking in the cold sea air, as he was helplessly being carried down the 2x4 skid track, attempting to do what no other man had done in the history of the world. I would have been thinking, "I wish Wilbur had won the coin toss!" But Orville had tested the machine and the conditions in every possible way and he really believed that he was going to fly. He had carefully placed his faith, with open eyes, into this machine.

120 feet, 12 seconds on the first flight. Orville was safe.

2 flights to follow, the last by Wilbur – 59 seconds, 800 feet.

Oh yeah, John T. Daniels squeezed the bulb at the right time and his first-ever photograph became one of the most seen photographs in American history!

As Orville summed it up: It was the first flight in the history of the world in which a machine carrying a man had raised itself by its own power into the air in full flight, had sailed forward without reduction of speed, and had finally landed at a point "as high" as that from which it started.

The five visitors drifted away. Orville and Wilbur Wright, now with no need to hurry, prepared and ate their lunch. They washed the dishes and then calmly walked five miles to the Kitty Hawk weather station. They sent a telegram to their clergyman father back in Dayton. It read "Success Four Flights. We'll be back for Christmas." They were. When they arrived at Dayton a few days later, there were no throngs and no band. Only their father and Katherine, their sister, and Lorin, their older brother. The conquerors of the air rode home in a one-horse surrey.

One day you will experience the sting of death upon your family, most of you already have encountered its overwhelming power. At that moment in your life you will have to place all of your weight on the Gospel story. And when you do, it will fly! It will fly! It will not disappoint you.

Where there is darkness, there will be light.

Where there is weakness, there will be strength.

Where there is despondency, there will be hope.

And where there is death, there will be life.