

The Core Truths

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 (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Song: “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”

In a classic *Peanuts* cartoon, Charlie Brown finds out that Snoopy is writing a book of theology. Charlie rolls his eyes and says Snoopy had better have a great title. Snoopy lifts his hands off the typewriter, closes his eyes, and thinks to himself, I have the perfect title. He then types this question: “Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?”

Thankfully, Christianity’s most important beliefs are core gospel truths by and about Jesus Christ as taught in the Scriptures. Each branch of the church down through the centuries and around the world has the opportunity to bear witness to them—and has often cited today’s Scripture. There is unity in that.

Yes, each branch of Christianity has secondary and tertiary points of doctrine and practice. We acknowledge these differences as distinctive expressions that each offers to the rest of the church. But more importantly, like the apostle Paul, we must keep emphasizing what’s “of first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Heavenly Father, thank You for making core gospel truths so clear and for the life-transforming power of these truths. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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February 8–14. **David Sanford** lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife of 38 years. He loves to collect rocks and sea glass on the West Coast’s most picturesque beaches.

Not Knowing How the Story Ends

Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

Scripture: John 19:25-30

Song: “Lead Me to the Cross”

I like to quip that I’m from a very long line of atheists in the Seattle area. When I decided to become a wholehearted follower of Jesus Christ, I opened my Bible and began reading page after page. Imagine encountering Scripture’s most famous stories for the first time, without any clue of what happens next. That was my experience reading God’s Word cover to cover for the first time. I felt genuine shock and surprise, laughter and confusion, anguish and tears. Talk about an emotional roller coaster!

Despite everything Jesus Christ had told them, the apostles and other followers somehow didn’t realize He would be arrested, tried, beaten, flogged, and crucified. They made no burial arrangements ahead of time, and certainly never expected Jesus to physically rise from the dead. What’s more, they had no conceptual framework to even imagine such a possibility.

In a world awash with instant information, you and I still will never plumb the depths of Scripture’s narratives, poetry, prophecy, Gospels, and teachings. That’s OK! It means we can prayerfully read each passage with fresh eyes—ready for more insights, understanding, and epiphanies. The more we remember who the Lord God is, the more we will see and believe. May that be your experience these next few days!

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your infinite and eternal knowledge, insight, understanding, wisdom, and ways. Please give me fresh eyes as I consider Scripture passages anew. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Overcoming Our Fear of Speaking

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:8).

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

Song: “Forever”

Virtually all modern-English Bible translations include notes about the uncertainties at the end of Mark’s Gospel. What is certain is that Mark 16 ends abruptly at verse 8, today’s verse, in the two oldest extant codices of the New Testament. In the first codex, scribes left nearly half of that page blank. Otherwise, zero gaps appear. They didn’t even leave any space between words!

If Mark intentionally ended his Gospel with verse 8, he wanted something. Likely, he wanted Christians to read the Gospel aloud to their households, neighbors, and friends. At the climax, of course, they would unexpectedly stop and say no more. This probably provoked not-yet-Christians to ask, “What? Why does Mark end the Jesus story that way? What happened?”

In the Gospels, Jesus himself uses periods of silence, puzzling stories, and pithy statements. To Him, relationship and meaning triumph over social norms every time. He interrupts. He doesn’t answer. He changes the subject. He provokes. He monologues. It’s all fair game toward His overriding mission. He may shake people to the core of their being, inflict many a sleepless night, haunt them with statements they never wanted to hear. Ultimately, His mission is to win their hearts. May you and I have the boldness and courage to do the same.

Heavenly Father, thank You for showing me how to value Your revealed truths and my relationships. Today please infuse me with humble boldness. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Living Wholeheartedly for the Lord

They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead (John 20:9).

Scripture: John 20:1-9

Song: “Glorious Day (Living He Loved Me)”

I love the picturesque Oregon coast. Every mile is public and free. No “Keep Out” signs anywhere. Walking along a favorite beach with my family, I came across a 30-foot piece of kelp and impulsively picked it up. “Watch this, kids!” I yelled. Swoosh! That mighty “whip” went whistling through the air—and I’ve never been hit so hard in the face in all my life!

Like that “whip,” reality has a way of getting our attention. By the time we finish reading the Gospels, Jesus Christ has made it crystal clear to His followers that great pain, suffering, and death lay ahead. He warned that many would be hunted down, arrested, beaten, and killed. The first deacon to die (by stoning) was Stephen, which sparked a wave of imprisonments and martyrdoms of both Christian men and women. The first apostle to die (by beheading) was John’s own brother, James.

What gave them unprecedented courage and indomitable fortitude in the face of such dire consequences? The answer begins with the bodily resurrection of their Lord and Savior, who conquered sin and death—for them, yes, and also for you and me. Even if we never face persecution, may today’s Scripture strongly convict us to live the rest of our days as wholehearted Christians.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the Gospel accounts of Jesus Christ’s bodily resurrection and appearances. Today please infuse me with stronger conviction. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Risen Indeed!

The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples (Matthew 28:8).

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

Song: “Christ Arose”

Journalists compile far more facts than they’ll ever use, and selectively report only those few facts deemed most relevant to their intended audiences. As a result, a news story about an NBA game sounds far different in the guest team’s hometown than in the home team’s. Same game, same hundreds and thousands of facts—but quite different audiences. Stranger? Most of the players won’t even be named.

The same principle of selectivity holds true as Matthew writes the last page of his Gospel. He doesn’t name all the players. He certainly doesn’t describe what they did or planned to do, let alone convey what each felt, thought, and said. Still, what Matthew writes is 100 percent true. It’s also laser-focused on convincing readers of one overriding gospel truth. As attested by known witnesses and angelic beings, Jesus has conquered the grave and risen from the dead.

If asked to summarize his Gospel using three key events, Matthew likely would have said Christmas (chapters 1 and 2), Good Friday (chapters 26 and 27), and Resurrection Sunday (chapter 28). Yes, chapters 3 to 25 are vitally important! Still, Christmas split history in two (BC and AD), and a third of earth’s population will remember Good Friday and then celebrate the resurrection again this spring.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the testimonies of angels and eyewitnesses in today’s Scripture. Today I gladly affirm the wonderful truth, “He has risen indeed!” In Jesus’ name, amen.

Behind Locked Doors

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them (John 20:19).

Scripture: John 20:19-23

Song: “Alive”

Thanks to a friend who opened many doors for me, I have had the privilege of getting to know and working with some of the most interesting and successful people in the world. You may be an entertainer taking home \$35,000 per hour. You may be a pitcher for the Boston Red Sox. You may be a Wall Street corporate merger guru. Still, I believe everyone has to learn how to overcome gripping fear—even people who are successful.

When the Lord Jesus appears in a room full of shell-shocked men and women, they're startled and frightened. What's more, they seriously doubt their senses, so Jesus shows them His hands and feet. Then He asks for some food to eat. He wants to prove beyond question that He isn't an apparition or ghost. Finally, doubt is erased and delight fills the room.

In your life and mine, the Lord doesn't shame us when we experience doubt and fear. Instead, He acknowledges the reality of what we think and feel, and He longs to fill us with faith, hope, love, joy, and peace. May you and I enjoy fresh new experiences of each.

Heavenly Father, thank You for building up our faith in the face of fear. Over this weekend, please renew the joy of my salvation. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Second Group Following Jesus

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” (John 20:18).

Scripture: Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40; John 20:10-18

Song: “My Jesus I Love Thee”

Two dozen hands immediately shot up when I asked nearly 70 UC Berkeley students, “What do your professors say in class that makes it hard to be a Christian?” I called on a student to my far right. She spoke up for the whole audience to hear her restate a women’s studies professor that says, “Christianity has oppressed women.” First, I sincerely thanked her for raising this important issue. Second, I named three specific books that address it biblically, theologically, and practically. In other words, this is a real accusation with real answers.

As Jesus traveled, He was accompanied by His 12 disciples—and by a second group. That second group, which we often fail to see in our mind’s eye, was composed of women. They included Mary Magdalene, who proclaimed to the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. And there was also Joanna, the wife of “the manager of Herod’s household,” and Susanna, and many more. They followed Jesus, served Him, and gave out of their own financial resources to support Jesus and the disciples. By including this second group, Jesus conferred new identity, status, dignity, and destiny to women. That’s still what happens when a woman follows the Lord, and it’s good news worth sharing!

Heavenly Father, thank You for creating women. Thank You too for honoring biblical women in so many ways. Please give me an opportunity to share this good news today. In Jesus’ name, amen.