

I Corinthians 15 – The Resurrection

Questions to Ponder

What will Heaven be like? What will we be like in Heaven?

Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, once wrote, “And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be”. But for the Christian we can have victory in death – there is no riddle, and we can be sure about what lies beyond death!

The Corinthian Context

It is only in v12 that we realise what was the issue in Corinth that led Paul to write this Chapter.

“how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (v12)

Some of the Corinthians were teaching that there was no such thing as a resurrection of the dead. It is not immediately clear exactly what the Corinthians meant by this, but there are three main possibilities:

1. The Corinthians believed they had already received everything they needed

In 4:8 Paul wrote, “Already you have all you want!” The Corinthians believed they had already reached maturity and fullness in the Christian life. Some writers believe that this had led them to think that they already had the fullness of everything they would receive from Christ. If this is true, the Corinthians would have no need to believe in the resurrection of the body, as they could experience all that God could offer in their current bodies. This belief may be similar to Hymenaeus and Philetus, about whom Paul wrote to Timothy (II Timothy 2:17&18). They taught that “the resurrection has already taken place”. Presumably they believed that the faithful could continue to live in their current bodies as healing would be their right through the cross of Christ. David Prior writes, “Such triumphalist teaching has its modern counterpart in the ‘prosperity-churches’ now burgeoning in many countries (i.e. ‘trust God and you will be prosperous healthy and successful’).” The idea that healing is the right-by faith of all Christians denies the New Testament theology of suffering and Paul’s teaching that the redemption of the body is still future (see below).

2. They denied the historical claim of Christ’s resurrection

This is possible, and has its counterpart today. However, the chapter seems to have a broader concern with the issue of resurrection generally, and so the third option is probably closest to the truth:

3. They were influenced by Gnosticism and so denied possibility of bodily resurrection

The Gnostics claimed a special insight into God’s mind. Their thinking was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and in particular Plato. Plato had taught 500 years earlier that the body is a prison for the soul, and that death marks the release of the immortal soul to soar to the real world, of which this physical Universe is a mere shadow. This thinking still heavily influences Christian thinking even today, and is responsible for views of the body as being somehow intrinsically evil and something to be shunned. The Corinthians were quite probably influenced by Gnostic ideas, and therefore denied that the body would be raised.

Paul’s Thought Flow

- vv1-11 A reminder of the good news**
 - a) Its meaning for the Corinthians (vv1&2)
 - b) Its central facts (vv3-8)
 - c) Its impact on Paul (vv9-11)
- vv12-34 The Centrality of Christ’s Resurrection**
 - a) The futility of Christian belief without it (vv12-19)
 - b) The future implications of it (vv20-28)
 - c) The futility of Christian behaviour without it (vv29-34)
- vv35-57 The Nature of our Future Resurrection**
- v58 A Closing Challenge**

Things of First Importance (3-11)

... according to the Scriptures	Historical proof
Christ died for our sins (v3b)	He was buried (v4a)
He was raised on the third day (v4b)	He appeared to ... (vv5-8)

This Gospel (or “good news”) is:

- 1. Historical – he was buried and later seen (vv4&5)**

Paul establishes the historical facts of the good news. Christ died and was raised again. He appeals to two pieces of evidence to prove this. The death of Christ is proven by the fact that He was buried. The soldiers who crucified Christ were experts, and they pierced the side of the dead Jesus to confirm that He was dead. The disciples removed the body and laid it in a tomb. You do not bury a living person! The resurrection of Christ was also a verifiable historical fact. The proof is that He was seen by many people – including over 500 at one time – and that most of them are still alive at the time of Paul's writing (which was probably in the 50's AD, only around 20 years after Jesus died). The Christian faith is based on historical facts. However, it is much more than this.

2. Scriptural – according to the Scriptures (vv3&4)

The gospel is also Scriptural. In other words, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament in His life, death and resurrection. The pattern for understanding the death and resurrection of Christ is laid down in the Old Testament. There are many pictures of sacrifice throughout the Old Testament, but one of the most powerful is the High Priest entering the Most Holy Place inside the Temple to offer a sacrifice for sins on behalf of the whole nation. This event happened only once per year, on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus Ch16). Only the High Priest could enter into this central room in the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the presence of God, was found. If he returned after offering the sacrifice it showed that it had been accepted by God. If the sacrifice was unacceptable he would die, and would not return alive. When Christ died He offered one sacrifice for sins forever as a High Priest (Hebrews 7:26-28). His resurrection proves that this sacrifice was acceptable to God – He returned alive, like the High priest returning out of the Temple.

3. Personal – He died for our sins (v3) and His grace impacted Paul's life (v10)

Christ did not just die for the sins of the world – He died for *our* sins! The good news is personal. Our hope is pinned on it, and it transforms our lives. In vv8-11 Paul gives a brief account of the change it has made in His life – the grace of God turned him around from being a persecutor of the church to being a preacher of Christ. The grace of God was not of no effect in Paul's life, and this too is a great proof of the gospel. It is not just historical. It is not only the fulfilment of Scripture. It has power to transform lives!

Q. Has this historical, scriptural message become personal in your life?

The gospel demands a response. Once it is heard it must be received, but this means more than just agreeing to it – it means to take ones stand on it (v1). This is true saving faith – when the person depends completely on the claims of Christ for their salvation and determines to follow Him as Lord. This kind of faith leads to the person holding fast to the truth of the gospel. If this is not in evidence, the person has “believed in vain” (v2).

If there is no resurrection ... (vv12-19 & 29-34)

The implications for the Christian faith of denying the resurrection are stark. First of all, Paul argues, if there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead, then:

Christ has not been raised (vv13, 16)

This is a logical step. The historical fact of the bodily resurrection of Christ is inextricably linked with the promise of the future bodily resurrection of those who believe in Him. If Christ is not raised, the whole of Christian belief and practice comes tumbling down like a house of cards. The facts of the gospel that Paul has reminded us of in vv3-11 are of “first importance” because they are the foundation of the entire Christian faith. If they are not true, then:

A Paul's preaching is useless – he is a false witness about God (vv14&15)

Since it was Paul who had preached the resurrection among them (v12), if this is a lie then Paul's preaching is useless. The word used (*Kenos*) means literally empty or hollow. The gospel Paul preached becomes empty and powerless if Christ did not rise, as the sacrifice He offered must therefore have been unacceptable to God.

B Their faith is useless:

(i) They are still in their sins (v17)

If the gospel they have believed in is empty, then necessarily their faith must be empty too. Faith in itself cannot save anyone if it is not founded in something true and powerful. Many people sincerely believe many things, but this in itself does not make them true. If Christ did not rise, His sacrifice is unaccepted and He has no power to save. Therefore, the sins of the Corinthians have not been forgiven, and they still stand condemned before God.

(ii) Those Christians who have already died are lost (v18)

If there is no resurrection, Paul says that those Christians who have already died would be “lost” – the word is literally “destroyed”. This could either mean they had ceased to exist (perhaps

meaning if there is no resurrection there is no afterlife) or that they are eternally separated from God (that is in Hell since there would have been no forgiveness for their sins).

(iii) Christians are pitiful (v19)

If the gospel is empty the Christian life is nothing more than a cruel joke, and Christians are to be pitied just as a person who is mentally ill and lives in a world of his own. If the Christian life is only for this life, with no hope of any life beyond, then all of our work and suffering for Christ in this life becomes meaningless.

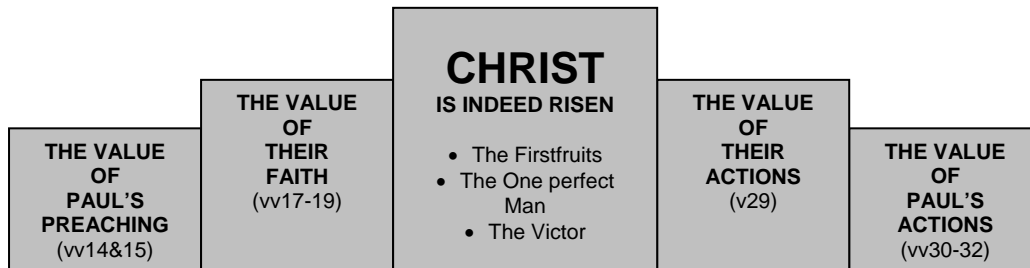
B' Their actions are meaningless – baptism “for the dead” is pointless (v29)

If the resurrection is not real, it is not only their belief that is empty – their actions as Christians are also pointless. Paul makes particular reference to those who have been “baptised for the dead”. The meaning of this term is not clear, and this is the only NT reference to this practice. Leon Morris writes that “between thirty and forty explanations have been suggested”, making this one of the most confusing verses in the Bible. Because of this confusion we should be careful about basing any doctrine or practice on this verse (as, for example, the Mormons do). The meaning would, undoubtedly, have been clear to both Paul and the Corinthians. My own view is that this phrase refers to a number of Corinthian Christians who had been baptised because of the testimony of people who had died as martyrs for their faith. The testimony of these believers even in the face of death had so impacted other people that they had become Christians (or had moved from uncertainty to a position of certain public confession of faith) and so were baptised. If there is no resurrection this practice would have been pointless, as those people who had died were lost!

A' Paul's actions are meaningless – He is wasting His life (vv30-32)

Just as Paul's preaching would be empty if there is no resurrection, so would his life of service and sacrifice for the Lord. If there is no resurrection, Paul says, instead of suffering loss for the gospel he would be better to eat and drink until he dies (v32). If there is no reckoning before God after death, we might as well do what we like and please our own natural desires!

BUT Christ has indeed been raised!!! (vv20-28, 33 & 34)



Paul paints the gloomy picture of the hopelessness and pitiful-ness of his and the Corinthians' position if Christ had not been raised in vv12-19, but in v20 he emphatically proclaims “But Christ has indeed been raised”!!! This statement is like a resounding, triumphant call rising above the gloom of vv12-19 and overshadowing vv29-32. By implication, because Christ is risen Paul is not preaching or suffering in vain, and the Corinthians have not believed in vain or been baptised in vain for those who have already died. In these verses Paul conveys 3 major truths about the resurrection of Christ:

1. He is the firstfruits (vv20&23)

The “firstfruits” was the first part of the harvest that was traditionally offered to God by the Jews on the day after the first Sabbath after Passover (see Leviticus 23:9-14). This feast was always therefore on a Sunday, pre-figuring Christ's resurrection. It was a sign of the full harvest that would come. The idea here is of Christ being the first of the new race of perfected humanity to rise from the dead, and that we will follow in our time. If there is a firstfruits there must also be a complete harvest. Notice the term Paul uses to describe those Christians who have died – “fallen asleep”. The idea seems to be that after death there is no consciousness until the final resurrection when Christ returns again. It is a beautiful image of peace and rest after the labour of this life is over.

2. He is the One perfect Man (vv21&22)

The theme of contrasting Christ with Adam is a common one in Paul's writing. He will return to it later in this chapter (vv45-49), and he writes about it in Romans 5:12-21. Only Adam and Christ could represent the entire human race in their actions and decisions – Adam because he was the only man at that time, and Christ because He was the only human after Adam born sinless and living without sin. Adam made a choice for disobedience, and so the principle of sin and its result – death – came upon all men. Christ, however, was obedient, and through His death He brought forgiveness of sins, and through His resurrection He brings the promise of resurrection to all who are “in Christ”. Those who are “in Adam”

(every human being) are born as his descendants, but those who are "in Christ" are people who have received Him as Saviour and Lord, and so are united with Him by the Holy Spirit of God.

3. He is the Victor (vv24-28)

Christ is returning (v23), and this will mark "the end" – meaning the end of this world as we know it. He will destroy all dominion, authority and power, and then will hand over the kingdom to His Father. There is perfect divine order in this end of time, with Christ submitting Himself to His Father (v28 should probably read "the Son will subject Himself to Him who put everything under Him" rather than "the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him"). Paul's key point here, which he will return to later in the chapter, is that death itself will be conquered by Christ. It will be the last enemy to be destroyed (v26), but it will surely be destroyed. Death cannot, therefore, continue to hold those who belong to Christ!!!

Come back to your senses (vv33&34)!!!

As a result, Paul calls the Corinthians back to their senses in vv33&34. Some people known to them (perhaps even among them) do not know God, and it is time they stopped sinning for the sake of these people.

Our Salvation - Past, Present & Future

To fully understand the truth of this Chapter we must have an understanding of how God's plan to save us operates. In our lives His salvation is past, present and future.

	JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION	GLORIFICATION
WHEN	PAST "have been saved" Eph 2:8	PRESENT "who are being saved" II Corinthians 2:14	FUTURE "the coming ... salvation" I Peter 1:5
FROM ...	The PENALTY of sin Before God we stand "not guilty" because Christ has borne the punishment for our sins on the cross. This forgiveness is "once for all", and is received through repentance and faith.	The POWER of sin Day by day we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. God is saving us from the power of sin in our lives and we become more and more able to resist it and to do what is right.	The PRESENCE of sin On the day when Christ returns we will be made perfect as we shall see Him as He is. This "glorification" includes the new bodies we will have for eternity.
THE RESULT	We have been made RIGHT with God (Ephesians 2:5)	We are being made CHRIST-LIKE (II Corinthians 3:18)	We will be made PERFECT (I John 3:2)

The redemption of our bodies is, therefore, still future. Paul speaks of this future redemption in Romans 8:23. Until then our bodies are subject, together with all creation, to decay and death.

The Nature of the Resurrection Body (vv35-44)

1. An example from nature – seeds & plants (continuity BUT difference) (vv35-38)

Even if they can accept the truth of the resurrection, the Corinthians may still ask what the resurrection body will be like. This, perhaps, reflects the underlying issue of Platonic thinking of the body as intrinsically bad. How could we have the same kind of body after death? Even today people will ask similar questions for different reasons. They will say, "But the body decays after you die, so how can God bring it back to life?" or "After the body decays its particles may become part of another person's body, so when they are raised who gets those particles?" These objections, of course, become irrelevant when we consider the power of God! Paul points to nature, and the example of a seed. When a seed is sown it is one thing, but the plant that springs up seems completely different. There is, of course continuity, but there is also a great difference. So it will be with our resurrection bodies. There will be continuity with this current body (so it will not be completely different), and the new body may even include some particles from the original one, but there will also be significant differences.

2. Different kinds of matter (vv39-41)

These verses speak about the different kinds of physical body that exist even in our current universe. There are many forms of matter in the universe – ranging from the various bodies of creatures on earth to the various kinds of planet in the solar system. Each of these has its own physical properties.

3. The bodies contrasted (vv42-44):

In these verses Paul lists four differences between our current bodies and the resurrection body. This resurrection body will, presumably, be similar to the body Christ had after His resurrection (see I John

3:2, which is probably true in physical as well as ethical terms). In Philippians 3:21, Paul writes that Jesus will, "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body". From the NT accounts we can learn some helpful things about Jesus' resurrection body – it was physical, in that it could be seen and touched and he could eat. It was similar, but possibly different from before His death, in that the disciples could not instantly recognise Him (this may have been simply because they were not expecting to see Him or because He somehow looked different). The distinctions that Paul highlights here are:

a. Perishable v imperishable

The old body is perishable – this means that it is subject to decay. We know this from science and from experience – our current bodies are not capable of living forever since they are subject to disease and injury. Furthermore, even if we never had disease or injury, our bodies would decay because of the aging process. Our genes are programmed for death. We understand as Christians that this is a result of sin, which brought death upon mankind. The resurrection body will not be subject to decay – it will be capable of living forever, and will not age or be prone to injury or disease. This is what John tells us in Revelation 21:4, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away". No matter how much we try to prevent death and prolong life in this body, the simple fact is that it will never be able to sustain our life for eternity!

b. Dishonour v glory

It is not immediately obvious what this distinction means, but Paul is presumably emphasising the superiority of the resurrection body over the current body. It may also refer to the fact that because sin has corrupted our view of the body in this life we have to wear clothes to cover our nakedness (see Genesis 3:7). Perhaps in the resurrection body this effect of sin will be no more and we will have the same innocence Adam and Eve enjoyed before they sinned (Genesis 2:25). Other writers suggest that our resurrection body may literally shine with a visible glory (in the same way that Moses' face shone when he encountered God – see II Corinthians 3:7-13).

c. Weakness v power

Our current bodies are strictly limited in their strength, and become more so as the effects of aging and illness take hold. The resurrection body will have a power that is much greater than our current bodies and that does not diminish over time.

d. Natural v spiritual

Some versions have misleadingly translated the word "natural" as "physical", suggesting that our resurrection bodies will have no physical substance. This is not accurate, and is not in keeping with the physical nature of Christ's resurrection body (which was a transformed version of His body prior to His death). Nor is it in keeping with the sweep of NT teaching about our existence after death. The resurrection body will be different from this current body, but it will still be physical. Man was always intended to be a physical being, and the body is not evil. Adam and Eve were physical before they sinned, and we will be physical for eternity. In fact, our existence after death will probably be much more similar to existence on this earth than we tend to realise. The Bible teaches clearly that there will be a new earth and new heavens (i.e. a new Universe), which will be formed from the same matter that makes up this Universe (see Isaiah 65:17 & 66:22, II Peter 3:10-13 & Revelation 21:1). It is possible that Christ even gave clear, direct teaching about this as Peter says the hope for a new earth is "in keeping with His promise" (v13). II Peter 3 says that the "elements will melt with the heat" (v12), and it seems that God will melt the very matter of the universe and reform it into the new universe, rather than destroying this universe entirely. It seems from Revelation 21&22 that the new earth will be our dwelling place for eternity (see below).

4. The two Adams (vv45-49)

Here Paul returns to his contrast of Christ with Adam. We inherit our current body from Adam, the first man who was formed from the "dust of the earth" (v47), and we will inherit our resurrection body from the "last Adam" (v45), who is Christ. The distinction between the first Adam and the last Adam is that one was created a living being from the earth, whereas the other came from heaven (v47) and is a spirit who gives life to others (v45). These verses support the Biblical teaching that Christ is God become man as Christ is clearly said to have entered our world from Heaven, and He is said to be a life giving spirit, a definition that can only apply to God (as only God can create life).

The Curse Reversed in Christ (vv50-57)

In these verses Paul develops his themes about the resurrection body by giving an insight into how the resurrection of the bodies of Christians will happen. He makes three major points in these verses:

• **The current body is incapable of living forever (v50)**

Paul re-emphasises that our current bodies with their current "flesh and blood" (v50) are not capable of inheriting the fullness of God's Kingdom because they are perishable (subject to decay) whilst God's Kingdom is not. Therefore these current bodies simply cannot live forever. The resurrection is essential.

- **Our bodies will be changed instantaneously when Christ returns (vv51-53)**
Paul continues to speak about *how* we will be raised. The transformation of our bodies will be instantaneous (“in the twinkling of an eye” v52), and in that instant those Christians who have died will be raised in their new imperishable bodies, while the bodies of those Christians who are alive at the time will be “changed”. This will happen on the day when Christ returns (see v24 “then, when He comes, those who belong to Him”). In v53 Paul again emphasises the key difference between our current bodies and the resurrection bodies – perishable versus imperishable.
- **Death will be defeated by Christ the Victor (vv52-57)**
The ultimate result of the resurrection is that death will be finally defeated and we will have the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Victor (see vv 20-28). The picture is of sin and all of its effects on the created Universe being destroyed. As Paul describes it in another passage, “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). It is in that same Chapter of Romans that Paul speaks of the redemption of our bodies (v23). This is our future hope, and it is the reversal of the curse placed on this universe by God after the sin of Adam and Eve. In the end that curse will be reversed (compare Genesis 3:14-19 with Revelation 21:1-4 & 22:3). The gospel is not just about God bringing mankind back into relationship with Himself – it has implications for the entire created universe. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:20, God is reconciling “*all things* to Himself” through Christ “by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross”.

Key Points & Implications

In eternity:

- **We will remain individual persons in eternity (I John 3:2)**
This is important to understand. Sometimes we are so influenced by Greek philosophy that Christians even ask whether we will be individuals in eternity. The Scriptures teach that we will be personal individuals but that we will finally be Christ-like.
- **Our eternal state will be physical, not disembodied (I Cor 15:42)**
We will not exist as “ghosts” or disembodied spirits, but will have physical bodies for eternity, although these bodies will be different in some ways from our current bodies.
- **Our eternal dwelling will be a restored earth and universe (II Peter 3:11-13; Revelation 21)**
Although the Bible is not completely clear about the nature of our eternal dwelling, we know that God will recreate a new universe with a new earth. It seems that this will be our eternal home, and that life there may be more similar to life now than we realise, except without any of the effects of sin. Whatever it will be like, it will be wonderful, and our greatest joy will be to see Christ as He really is and to see one another made perfect in Him.

Now:

- **The body is not evil but should be offered to God in worship (Romans 12:1)**
Because it was always God’s intention that we should be physical, the body is just as much part of us as the unseen soul. The body must be offered to God as a “living sacrifice” of worship. We can honour God with our bodies, and we must discipline our bodies to enable us to grow spiritually.
- **The redemption of our bodies is still future (Romans 8:23)**
While we live in this body we will be subject to illness and decay. Christ’s death will be the basis of the redemption of our bodies, but this is not a benefit we will receive until Christ returns. Whilst God can and does heal people physically in miraculous ways, this healing is not the right of all believers through the cross in this life. Even those people who are healed will die at a later stage. Illness and death are for the believer are not necessarily signs of a lack of faith (although they could be), and the Biblical theology of suffering speaks much more of God using it to perfect our faith and to glorify Himself than of the certain expectation of healing. In fact, faithfulness to God may often bring us into suffering (for example persecution) rather than leading to its absence. God is sovereign, and while we await our future glorification we should count our present sufferings “not worthy comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). For further study about suffering read the books of Job and I Peter.

Paul’s Conclusion (v58)

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour is not in vain.”

If there is a resurrection after the death of this body there is meaning in our actions done in this body not just for this life, but for eternity. This makes all of Paul’s labour meaningful, and should inspire us to work all the harder for the Lord. Sacrifice in this life is worth it because it can have eternal consequences. This is the amazing promise of the gospel! Are we building our own little kingdom here on earth, or are we building into God’s eternal kingdom things that will last for eternity?