

## Back to the Basics: The Resurrection

I have had people tell me that the Bible has changed dramatically over the years. That if we could just get back to the “original” documents we would see a big change that has occurred over the years & see how Jesus didn’t really make all these claims to be God in the flesh, etc. That they didn’t really believe that He was raised from the dead or did all these miracles...

- This was a very common argument by liberal theologians in the late 1800 & early 1900’s.
  - Prior to 1947 the earliest manuscripts we had were about 300+ years removed from when Paul, and others, wrote their letters.
  - But in 1947 a young shepherd boy was bored while tending to his sheep so he began picking up rocks & throwing them into nearby caves. When he picked up a rock & threw it into a cave he heard a CRASH! He had hit a clay jar & broken it open...
    - The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered & suddenly the historical manuscripts moved up dramatically!
      - The Dead Sea scrolls provided a manuscript of Isaiah that pre-dated the next earliest one by over 1,000 years!
    - Most astounding to many, and disappointing to the liberal “scholars”, is that the texts were about 95% accurate with what they had been using and the bulk of that 5% difference was word spelling had changed over the years!

<http://www.centuryone.com/25dssfacts.html>

All that being said... When we read the Bible we can TRUST it is authentic that the writer was saying what he wanted to say. That the author was saying what GOD wanted to be said...

- So here in chapter 15 we see that Paul is writing to the people in Corinth about what is most important about their faith. The Building Blocks of the Christian faith...
  - What is it? What is MOST IMPORTANT in our faith???

Now brothers, I want to clarify for you the gospel I proclaimed to you; you received it and have taken your stand on it. <sup>2</sup>You are also saved by it, if you hold to the message I proclaimed to you— unless you believed for no purpose. <sup>3</sup>For I passed on to you as **most important** what I also received:

that Christ died for our sins  
according to the Scriptures,  
<sup>4</sup> that He was buried,  
that He was raised on the third day  
according to the Scriptures,  
<sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas,  
then to the Twelve.

<sup>6</sup> Then He appeared to over 500 brothers at one time;  
most of them are still alive,  
but some have fallen asleep.

<sup>7</sup> Then He appeared to James,  
then to all the apostles.

<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one abnormally born,  
He also appeared to me.

<sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But **by God's grace I am what I am,** and His grace toward me was not ineffective. However, I worked more than any of them, yet not I, but God's grace that was with me. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, whether it is I or they, so we proclaim and so you have believed.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

## Background:

“THE RESURRECTION BRINGS us to the very center of the Christian faith. When Paul was on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, he summed up the charge against him as his “hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6; cf. 24:21; 26:6–8). When he clothed the gospel for the Athenians in almost entirely different garb, he nevertheless still focused on “Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).” (Blomberg)

- The Resurrection is the foundation of our Faith.
  - Many a man has died for his religion.
    - Christ died for humanity & then was RESURRECTED!
- I am speaking of a PHYSICAL resurrection. Not simply a “spiritual” one.
  - He spoke with them.
  - They touched Him.
  - He ate with them.
  - Clearly, hear, Paul is pointing out that he PHYSICALLY appeared to them. To hundreds! (V.4-9)

- Not some mass hallucination but over several different instances, when the Apostles were not expecting Christ, He appeared.

## Jesus is really alive & it really matters.

Why does it matter for Christianity?

“Christ’s death and resurrection in space and time, as bona fide historical events, actually set Christianity apart from all its major rivals. Later Western religions that developed in part in reaction to Christianity do not claim deity or resurrections for their originators, merely prophetic status (e.g., Mohammed in Islam or Joseph Smith in Mormonism). Older Eastern religions do not even require the actual historical existence of their founders for their beliefs and practices to make sense. In some ways they are more akin to philosophies than to historical truth-claims (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism). But Christianity lives or dies with the claim of Christ’s resurrection. To be sure, it is possible to believe in Jesus’ resurrection and not become a Christian,<sup>30</sup> but without the bodily resurrection Christianity crumbles. Finding the bones of Jesus would assuredly disprove our religion!” (Blomberg)

So what if Christ was alive some 2000 years ago, He can’t be alive today or have any impact in my life today... (Says the skeptic.)

Why does it matter in my own individual life?

Paul gets done talking about the historical facts & then he gets personal...

*“For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by God’s grace I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not ineffective. However, I worked more than any of them, yet not I, but God’s grace that was with me. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, whether it is I or they, so we proclaim and so you have believed.”* V. 9-11

### INSERT YOUR PERSONAL TESTIMONY

- Christians must appeal to more than a personal testimony; they must recognize the historical evidence that is on their side. (Blomberg)

- Many participants in other world religions have a personal “spiritual experience” but we operate not just on emotion. Our savior is ALIVE & our personal experience is further proof of that!

**Jesus is really alive & it really matters.**

## Are the Dead Raised? (1 Cor. 15:1–19)

It is important to note that the believers at Corinth did believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ; so Paul started his argument with that fundamental truth. He presented three proofs to assure his readers that Jesus Christ indeed had been raised from the dead.

**Proof #1—their salvation (vv. 1–2).** Paul had come to Corinth and preached the message of the Gospel, and their faith had transformed their lives. But **an integral part of the Gospel message was the fact of Christ’s resurrection.** After all, a dead Saviour cannot save anybody. Paul’s readers had received the Word, trusted Christ, been saved, and were now standing on that Word as the assurance of their salvation. The fact that they were standing firm was proof that their faith was genuine and not empty.

**Proof #2—the Old Testament Scriptures (vv. 3–4).** *First of all* means “of first importance.” The Gospel is the most important message that the church ever proclaims. While it is good to be involved in social action and the betterment of mankind, there is no reason why these ministries should preempt the Gospel. **“Christ died ... He was buried ... He rose again ... He was seen” are the basic historical facts on which the Gospel stands (1 Cor. 15:3–5).** *“Christ died for our sins”* (author’s italics) is the theological explanation of the historical facts. Many people were crucified by the Romans, but only one “victim” ever died for the sins of the world.

When Paul wrote “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3) he was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures. Much of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament pointed to the sacrifice of Christ as our substitute and Saviour. The annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) and prophecies like Isaiah 53 would also come to mind.

But where does the Old Testament declare His resurrection on the third day? Jesus pointed to the experience of Jonah (Matt. 12:38–41). Paul also compared Christ’s resurrection to the “firstfruits,” and the firstfruits were presented to God on the day following the Sabbath after Passover (Lev. 23:9–14; 1 Cor. 15:23). Since the Sabbath must always be the seventh day, the day after Sabbath must be the *first* day of the week, or Sunday, the day of our Lord’s resurrection. This covers three days on the Jewish calendar. Apart from the Feast of Firstfruits, there were other prophecies of Messiah’s resurrection in the Old Testament: Psalm 16:8–11 (see Acts 2:25–28); Psalm 22:22ff (see Heb. 2:12); Isaiah 53:10–12; and Psalm 2:7 (see Acts 13:32–33).

**Proof #3—Christ was seen by witnesses (vv. 5–11).** On the cross, Jesus was exposed to the eyes of unbelievers; but after the Resurrection, He was seen by believers who could be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). Peter saw Him and so did the disciples collectively. James was a half brother of the Lord who became a believer after the Lord appeared to him (John 7:5; Acts 1:14). The 500 *plus* brethren all saw Him at the same time (1 Cor. 15:6), so

it could not have been a hallucination or a deception. This event may have been just before His ascension (Matt. 28:16ff).

But one of the greatest witnesses of the Resurrection was Paul himself, for as an unbeliever he was soundly convinced that Jesus was dead. The radical change in his life—a change which brought him persecution and suffering—is certainly evidence that the Lord had indeed been raised from the dead. Paul made it clear that his salvation was purely an act of God’s grace; but that grace worked in and through him as he served the Lord. “Born out of due time” probably refers to the future salvation of Israel when they, like Paul, see the Messiah in glory (Zech. 12:10–13:6; 1 Tim. 1:16).

At this point, Paul’s readers would say, “Yes, we agree that *Jesus* was raised from the dead.” Then Paul would reply, “If you believe that, then you must believe in the resurrection of *all* the dead!” Christ came as a man, truly human, and experienced all that we experienced, except that He never sinned. If there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. If He was not raised, there is no Gospel to preach. If there is no Gospel, then you have believed in vain and you are still in your sins! If there is no resurrection, then believers who have died have no hope. We shall never see them again!

The conclusion is obvious: Why be a Christian if we have only suffering in this life and no future glory to anticipate? (In 1 Cor. 15:29–34, Paul expanded this idea.) The Resurrection is not just important; it is “of first importance,” because all that we believe hinges on it.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The facts of the resurrection of Jesus (15:1–11)

In these verses Paul reiterates the basic content of the gospel which he had proclaimed to the Corinthians from the beginning. However much he unfolds further insights as he develops the theme of resurrection, it is important to note that here he is repeating the facts, not adding to them. When there is doubt in people’s minds about certain theological issues, it is easy to conclude that these fundamental facts are either insufficient or untrustworthy. Paul entertains no such ideas: he reminds the Corinthians of the gospel which they heard him preach and which they *received* (1).

This word *received* (*paralambanō*) refers to an established tradition passed on personally, and almost certainly by word of mouth, from the original eyewitnesses of the facts involved in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul has used the same vocabulary in recording the institution of the Lord’s Supper. When we recollect that 1 Corinthians was written in the early fifties, we can see that these facts at the heart of the gospel-message concerning the resurrection of Jesus go back to within twenty years of the actual events. We are, therefore, as close as we

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 617–618). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

can possibly come to eyewitness accounts of what took place in Jerusalem in those days. Paul has no hesitation in answering Corinthian doubts about resurrection by means of such historical evidence. The gospel-facts he proclaimed were those he himself received from eyewitnesses, probably when he visited Jerusalem to consult with Peter and James. His exposition of the *significance* of those facts he claimed to have received 'by revelation'.

He affirms that such a gospel has brought them salvation (2, *by which you are saved*). His only reservation lies in the shakiness of their faith in Christ. 'If men's grip of the gospel is such that they are not really trusting Christ, their belief is groundless and empty. They have not saving faith.' Paul understandably deprecates any attitude or ideas which undermine faith in such a way. We constantly need to reiterate the heart of the gospel, and that involves taking a firm grip on the historical facts (2, *hold it fast*).

What are these facts? 'Christ died ... was buried ... was raised on the third day ... appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then to more than 500 brethren at one time ..., then to James, then to all the apostles' (3-7).

Before we look at Paul's account of the resurrection appearances, it is worth noting his reference to the fact that *Christ ... was buried* (4). 'Many scholars see here an oblique reference to the empty tomb', and the phrase *he was buried* is probably included, not merely as a necessary and actual stage in the whole drama, but as confirming the reality both of death and of resurrection. 'If he was buried he must have been really dead; if he was buried, the resurrection must have been the reanimation of a corpse... If he was buried, and was subsequently seen alive outside his grave, the grave must have been empty, and may well have been seen to be empty.'

Paul includes in these gospel-facts the statement that *Christ died for our sins* (3). There is no true proclamation of the gospel which does not explain, in New Testament terms, the link between human sin and the death of Christ. **Indeed, there is no gospel at all unless the death of Christ can be seen to deal with sin once and for all.** The fact of resurrection by itself says little about the heart of the gospel, unless it can be shown that 'the sting of death is sin' (15:56) and that the resurrection of Christ has therefore drawn that sting.

The apostle's other factor at the heart of the gospel-facts is that both the death and the resurrection of Christ were *in accordance with the scriptures* (3 and 4). We recall that Jesus, in the evening of Easter Day on the road to Emmaus with two disciples, 'interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself'. As we also read the Old Testament scriptures<sup>15</sup> in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, they will speak to us eloquently of him.

The Old Testament actually speaks in only very shadowy terms of anything remotely like resurrection. On the other hand, the hope of the psalmists that they will not be given up to Sheol (which basically denotes emptiness, if not oblivion) was based firmly on confidence in God's power over death. This confidence contained the seeds of a sure hope in resurrection. Likewise, the salvation promised by God to the patriarchs and their descendants implicitly contains the assurance of resurrection, particularly in view of the promise being rooted in an irreversible covenant. This, in fact, is at the heart of Jesus' own confrontation with the Sadducees (who denied any possibility of resurrection), where Jesus concludes: 'Have you not read ... how God said to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, ... Isaac, and ... Jacob"? He is not God of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.' In these two examples, from the psalmists and the patriarchs, Jesus himself pointed to the truth of Paul's statement that his death and resurrection were 'in accordance with the scriptures'.

The appearances of the resurrected Jesus recorded by Paul, passing on what has been handed on to him by the original eyewitnesses, differ in several ways from the narratives in the four Gospels. G. E. Ladd's examination of these differences is illuminating and constructive, and we need not repeat his commentary. Paul's reference to a single appearance to over 500 brethren all together is clearly a very strong lynchpin in his argument about the truth of Jesus' resurrection, particularly as most of them were still alive and could be consulted personally.

Perhaps the most significant phrase in this account of the gospel-facts is in verse 8: *Last of all, ... he appeared also to me*. By this terminology Paul is saying at least two things: first, his own encounter with the risen Jesus (after the ascension) is of equal validity and identical in nature to the others he has just recorded; secondly, once the risen Jesus had appeared to Paul, there were no further appearances of that nature (*last of all*).

This is a necessary corrective to claims today to have had a vision of the ascended Jesus. Such an experience may well have taken place, but it is in no sense on a par with or of the same kind as Paul's experience on the Damascus road. The appearance to Paul was so unusual that the apostle calls himself *one untimely born (ektrōma)*. The word refers to a miscarriage or an abortion, and should probably not be taken too literally. Apparently the word was used as a term of abuse. 'Perhaps it had been hurled at Paul by his opponents. He was not a handsome man (2 Cor. 10:10), and they may have combined an insult to his personal appearance with a criticism of his doctrine of free grace.'

We can imagine such opponents declaring that, so far from being born again, Paul was an abortion. He was constantly overwhelmed by the sheer grace of God in forgiving, let alone calling as an apostle, one who had viciously persecuted the church (9–10). In that sense it was unnatural for him to encounter the risen Jesus in the same way as people like Peter and John. There is probably also a reference to the time-factor: he came on the scene too late to qualify as one of the original apostles, but God overrode that handicap as well.

It is not surprising, in the light of Paul's background, that he regarded himself as *the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle* (9). Only the grace of God could overcome such demerits: but because his grace *had* been lavished on such an unworthy person, Paul was not going to let anyone take either his position or his vocation away from him. To let that happen would be to treat God's grace flippantly. The only proper response to grace is total commitment with every fibre of our being (10). If God's grace does not produce such energetic single-mindedness, there is something seriously lacking in our faith. In the last analysis, however, the identity of the preacher is irrelevant: faith is kindled by the preaching of this gospel. There is no other.

## **2. The centrality of the resurrection of Jesus (15:12–19)**

If the gospel proclaimed to the Corinthians revolved around these crucial facts, culminating in the resurrection of Jesus, and if through this gospel their lives had been completely redirected and transformed, it was inconceivable that anyone should have asserted that *there is no resurrection of the dead* (12). If resurrection does not exist in any shape or form, then the consequences to Christian faith and discipleship are devastating. It is important, with Paul, to push people to see the logic of their beliefs, whether those beliefs are orthodox or heretical. Many Christians have never applied their faith either to their ordinary thinking or to their daily



behaviour. Likewise, those who deviate from biblical truth must face up to the implications of what they assert and deny. This is what Paul does in verses 13–19. To deny resurrection is to strip the Christian message of seven essentials.<sup>2</sup>

## The Reality of Christ's Resurrection (15:1–11)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *Paul reminded the Corinthians of the importance of the gospel they had believed. He included the resurrection as an important element of the gospel.*

**15:1.** Paul appealed once again to the Corinthians as **brothers** as he began to talk about the resurrection. By this affectionate term Paul affirmed the Corinthians in their basic commitments to Christ's resurrection, wanting to **remind** them of the elements of the **gospel**, not to challenge their acceptance of it.

The **gospel**, or good news, is the message of God's saving work in Christ. Up to this point, Paul had oriented the gospel message around Christ's death, but here he **preached** the gospel by emphasizing the resurrection. He also affirmed his belief that the Corinthian Christians had **received** this gospel message and had **taken** their **stand** on it. In Paul's day being a Christian was more than intellectual assent to a group of doctrines. **The social price that followers of Christ paid forced them to take a stand in a hostile world.**

**15:2.** Anticipating the importance of what he would say about the resurrection, Paul made it clear that anyone who did not hold to the gospel he had preached could not be **saved**. Only **by this gospel** could they be **saved** from God's judgment. Salvation comes through belief in the good news of Christ's death and resurrection.

Yet, Paul added an important qualification. They **are saved, if they hold firmly to the word**. As he indicated throughout this epistle, Paul believed that saving faith would set itself apart from insincerity through time. True believers persevere in their commitments to Christ. **Paul did not mean that truly regenerate people could lose their salvation, nor that truly regenerate people were without sin and failure. He understood, as the entire Bible teaches, that saving faith proves itself over a lifetime.**

Paul warned that if the Corinthians had once trusted the gospel of Christ but did not hold fast to that gospel, then they **believed in vain**. In other words, their temporary commitments to Christ would not benefit them as they had hoped. Anyone who turns away from belief in the resurrection of Christ puts himself in a precarious position. He or she stands in line for God's judgment, not for his eternal salvation.

**15:3–4.** Paul next explained why it was important for the Corinthians to believe his teaching about the resurrection. He justified his insistence that they hold fast to the gospel, insisting that the resurrection was central to the gospel message. Why was this so important? Why was the resurrection a necessary element of the gospel?

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<sup>2</sup> Prior, D. (1985). [\*The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church\*](#) (pp. 258–262). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

First, Paul **received** and **passed on** this gospel. In rabbinic Judaism this terminology described the transmission of authoritative religious teachings. Paul told the Corinthians to maintain the gospel as he had given it to them because it was a sacred tradition, not a human tradition.

Second, he delivered this gospel teaching as a matter **of first importance**. In other words, nothing was more central or more important in Paul's conception of gospel than these teachings.

Paul summed up his gospel as having two main concerns: the death and the resurrection of Christ. Both of these took place **according to the Scriptures**. Paul repeated this phrase to emphasize the importance of the scriptural witness and to demonstrate that the resurrection's importance paralleled the centrality of Christ's death.

He spoke first of Christ's death, declaring, **Christ died for our sins**. Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of believers brought salvation to those who would otherwise have been lost. When Paul said that Christ's death was **according to the Scriptures**, he probably had in mind Isaiah's prediction that the son of David would suffer on behalf of the people of God (Isa. 53:1–12).

Second, Paul referred to the resurrection. Christ was **buried**, but **he was raised on the third day**. Paul never said that Christ raised himself. Instead, the apostle taught that God the Father raised Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; Gal. 1:1). The resurrection was also **according to the Scriptures**. Paul probably had in mind Isaiah 53:10–12. The prophet explained that the son of David would come back from the grave to bring great blessings to God's people. Paul also may have thought of Psalm 16:10, a passage in which David recorded that God would not allow his Holy One to see decay. Jesus defended the idea of resurrection in the Old Testament by asserting that God was the God of the living (Matt. 22:31–32). By including both Christ's death and resurrection as essential elements of the gospel, Paul precluded those who denied the resurrection from claiming salvation in Christ.

**15:5–8**. Paul continued by adding a third element that expanded the second. Christ was not simply raised from the dead. He also **appeared**; people saw and heard him. Paul did not repeat the refrain "according to the Scriptures" here because no particular prophecy focused on appearances of the resurrected Son of David. But Paul did note that several people saw the resurrected Christ. These included **Peter, the Twelve, more than five hundred of the brothers ... most of whom were still living, James, all the apostles**, and Paul himself.

Although Paul's main idea was that all of these people bore witness to the resurrection of Christ, his list had at least three major concerns. Christ appeared to: (1) figures of central authority in the church (**Peter, the Twelve, James, all the apostles**); (2) large numbers of people (**Twelve, five hundred, all the apostles**); and (3) to Paul himself.

Paul declared that Christ had appeared to him on the road to Damascus **last of all ... as to one abnormally born**. The expression "last of all" probably indicates that Paul was the last person to see the resurrected Christ. Viewing the resurrected Savior was a requirement for apostleship (Acts 1:21–22). Yet, Paul admitted that his own situation had been extraordinary because Christ came to him in a miraculous manner after the ascension.

Thus, Paul saw himself as having been **abnormally born**. This expression is difficult to translate because it occurs only here in the New Testament. In an effort to express his humility, Paul compared himself to an untimely born child, indicating some degree of inferiority to those who had lived with Jesus during his earthly ministry.

**15:9.** In explaining why he spoke of himself in this way, Paul admitted to being the **least of the apostles**, not even deserving the title because he **persecuted the church of God**. This probably resonated strongly with his detractors. They most likely thought, “Obviously he is the least, that is why we favor Apollos and Cephas.”

**15:10.** But Paul went on to defend his apostolic authority by pointing to God’s choice of him. As Paul considered his background, he had no doubts that he had been called as a Christian and as Christ’s apostle (**I am what I am**) only by the **grace of God**. Paul taught elsewhere that the Christian life begins by grace and continues through God’s grace received by dependent faith. Here the apostle evaluated his own life in these terms. Not only had he initially believed because of God’s grace, but every good thing in his Christian life also came from the grace of God.

At this point, Paul concerned himself with one particular aspect of God’s **grace** in his life. Divine mercy had great **effect**, or result, on his service to the body of Christ. This is the same type of argument he used in 9:1–27 to defend his apostleship. The one who had once persecuted the church **worked harder than all** the other apostles. Paul assessed the situation honestly, not speaking proudly as if he had accomplished anything on his own. He reiterated that he did nothing in his own power. He performed only by **the grace of God that was with** him. Paul knew himself too well to take credit for the good he had done in Christ’s service. He knew that the only source that could produce these good works through him was **the grace of God**. Because he relied so strongly on God’s grace, he became one of the most effective apostles.

**15:11.** Paul closed this section by bringing his readers back to the main idea. The Corinthians must believe that Christ had been resurrected. On this all the apostles agreed—Christ’s resurrection was central to the gospel. All of the apostles continued to **preach** this message, and the Corinthians at one time had **believed** it as well. Paul hoped they would reaffirm their commitment to Christ’s resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

THIS IS THE FIRST major topic in the second half of Paul’s letter, dealing with issues arising from the Corinthians’ correspondence (7:1–16:4), that does not contain any hint of what the Corinthians wrote. Nor does it begin with “now about,” as do 7:1; 8:1, and 12:1. First Corinthians 16:1 will use that phrase again, so perhaps Paul simply omits it here for variety’s sake. Or maybe this section is meant to be more closely connected with chapters 12–14, reflecting some of what the Corinthian prophets and tongues-speakers were proclaiming. A third possibility is that chapter 15 may be addressing the otherwise unstated issue at the root of all the other problems the Corinthians faced.

At any rate, the position of some in the Corinthian church is specified in verse 12 (“How can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?”), and it is to this challenge that Paul responds. By denying the resurrection, the Corinthians were almost certainly not denying life after death; virtually everyone in the ancient world believed in that. Rather, they would

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<sup>3</sup> Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). [\*I & II Corinthians\*](#) (Vol. 7, pp. 258–260). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

have been disputing the Jewish and Christian doctrine of *bodily* resurrection and endorsing one of the more Greek forms of belief that limited the afterlife to disembodied immortality of the soul (cf. 2 Tim. 2:17–18). In keeping with their overly realized eschatology (see p. 25), and like some later Gnostics, they may have applied the language of resurrection to the state of spiritual transformation they believed they had already achieved in this life.

Chapter 15 falls into two main sections. Verses 1–34 present Paul’s arguments for the certainty of the bodily resurrection, while verses 35–58 discuss the nature of resurrection bodies. The first section also divides into two parts. Verses 1–11 reiterate the fact of Christ’s bodily resurrection. Verses 12–34 outline the consequences of disbelief and belief in this fact. The first of these parts in turn has three components. Verses 1–2 provide an introduction to Paul’s treatment of resurrection. Verses 3–8 rehearse the early Christian creed or confession about Christ’s death and resurrection. And verses 9–11 highlight Paul’s unique role as an “untimely” witness to the risen Lord.

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians what they should have remembered. With a twinge of irony, he actually says “I make known to you,” using their favorite language about knowledge (*gnosis*), as if they had never heard of this central doctrine before (v. 1). But this was what they believed when they first became Christians, and only by continuing to believe in a bodily resurrected Jesus can they demonstrate the reality of their faith and persevere until the end (v. 2). “In vain” at the end of verse 2 could also be translated “heedlessly” or “rashly.”

In verses 3–7 Paul repeats the foundational tradition that he had first taught the Corinthians. Although he became a Christian and therefore revised his thinking on basic doctrine, including Christ’s resurrection, as a result of his direct encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road (Gal. 1:12), he would not yet have known of all the eyewitnesses to whom he refers here until later discussion with two of them, Peter and James (Gal. 1:18–24). The early tradition would certainly have included reference to Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and one or more appearances. Its inclusion here makes it the earliest recorded oral or written testimony to the resurrection, tradition which is “of first importance” (v. 3; a more likely translation than the NIV footnote, “at the first”).

“That Christ died” (v. 3) refutes those docetists who believed that Christ only seemed to be human (because they also believed that matter was inherently evil). That it was “for our sins” points to a vicarious atonement—paying the penalty we deserved to pay on our behalf. “According to the Scriptures” probably has in mind passages such as those in Isaiah 52–53 that speak of God’s suffering servant. Jesus’ burial (v. 4) again certifies that he really died and also points forward to the empty tomb and the reality of the resurrection. “On the third day” uses inclusive reckoning: Good Friday is day one, Saturday is day two, and Easter morning is day three. It is less clear which Scriptures point to the *resurrection* on the third day. Perhaps Paul meant only that the Scriptures testified to Christ’s resurrection, with passages like Psalms 16:8–11 and 110:1–4 in view (cf. Acts 2:24–36). In that case, “according to the Scriptures” would modify only the verb “raised” and not the phrase “on the third day.” But he may also have found some typological significance in the third-day references to God’s vindication of his people in such texts as Genesis 42:18, Exodus 19:16, Joshua 2:22, Ezra 8:32, Esther 5:1, Jonah 1:17 (cf. Matt. 12:40), and especially Hosea 6:2.

Verses 5–7 proceed to supply a list of key witnesses to certify the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus appeared to Peter by himself on that first Easter Sunday (Luke 24:34). “The

Twelve" (v. 5) probably refers to the original apostolic band, even when Judas and Thomas were missing (John 20:19–23). No other reference to an appearance to five hundred (v. 6) is found in Scripture, but that many of these people were still alive to be interviewed provided strong corroboration of Paul's claims. Neither is the appearance to James (v. 7—referring to the Lord's brother) described elsewhere, but it probably caused his conversion (contrast his attitude to Jesus in John 7:5). The appearance to all the apostles could refer to any of several occasions: the Sunday night following Easter (John 20:24–29), the occasion of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20) or the day of Christ's ascension (Acts 1:1–11).

After his ascension, which signaled the end of the resurrection appearances, no one expected to see Jesus in this way again. So Paul's "private viewing" (v. 8; cf. Acts 9:1–31) came as a shock. "One abnormally born" translates the Greek word for "miscarriage." But of course a miscarriage is a premature birth; here Jesus' resurrection appearance to Paul was unusually late. Hence the NIV takes the point of the comparison to be something that was simply abnormal. But it may be that Paul had in mind that when Christ appeared to him, God's purposes for his life were so far unfulfilled. Moreover, "in comparison with the other apostles who had accompanied Jesus during his ministry he had been born without the due period of gestation."

In verses 9–11, Paul acknowledges his inferiority as an apostle because he had persecuted the first Christians (v. 9; cf. Acts 8:1; 9:1–2). But he turns this admission of weakness into an opportunity to magnify God's grace. And that grace did not lead to sloth but to greater effort and substantial accomplishment (v. 10). Yet lest his remarks be seen as prideful or competitive, he closes this paragraph by stressing that all the apostles agree on the message of the resurrection and that this belief is what initially led to the Corinthians' salvation as well (v. 11). Verse 11b repeats the thoughts of verse 1 to bring this first section of chapter 15 to a close.

Verses 12–34 form an ABA pattern. Verses 12–19 and 29–34 both argue for the absurdity of Christian belief and practice if the bodily resurrection is not true. In between, verses 20–28 gloriously reaffirm that it *is* true and point to some of the consequences of this grand doctrine. The main point of verses 12–19 is that if there is no coming bodily resurrection of all Christians, then Jesus himself was not bodily raised, and that makes Christianity futile. Paul continuously repeats this thought from several different angles in these verses. The upshot is that all of the following result if there is no bodily resurrection: both the apostolic preaching and the Corinthians' faith are useless (v. 14); Paul and his companions are liars (v. 15); all humanity stands condemned because of their sins (v. 17); and those who have already died, including believers, are eternally lost (v. 18). As a result, Christians are most deserving of others' pity or compassion, since they have given up creaturely comforts and endured persecution (vv. 30–32) for the sake of an empty promise (v. 19).

But wonderfully none of this is true, Paul retorts. Christ *has* been raised bodily and has thus set into motion an inexorable chain of events that will culminate in the universal demonstration of the absolute sovereignty of God (vv. 20–28). Verses 20–22 describe how Christ's bodily resurrection guarantees the future bodily resurrection of all believers, just as the "firstfruits" of a harvest (v. 20) heralded a much larger crop to follow (cf. Lev. 23:9–14). Paul points out the parallel between Adam's sin leading to the sinfulness of all humanity (cf. Rom. 5:12–21) and Christ's resurrection leading to the resurrection of all his followers (vv. 21–22). Because Adam represented the entire human race that would descend from him, sin spread throughout the

whole world. Because Christ, as fully human, represented the entire human race in bearing its sins, he is able to apply the benefits of his death and resurrection to all who will accept them (cf. Heb. 2:5–9, appealing to Psalm 8, just as Paul will do in v. 26 here). “All” in the statement “all die” (v. 22a) means “all who are related to Adam.” “All” in the declaration “all will be made alive” (v. 22b) refers to “all who are related to Christ,” as verse 23 makes clear (“those who belong to him”).

But the general resurrection of believers at the time of Christ’s return is just the beginning (v. 23). Verses 24–28 go on to explain what will subsequently occur. After some unspecified interval of time, “the end” or goal of human history will arrive. By this time, Christ will have destroyed all opposition to his reign in the universe—both human and angelic (i.e., demonic—vv. 24–25). Finally, death itself will be destroyed, so that God’s people will never again have anything to fear for all eternity (v. 26). But the last word is not Christ’s but God’s (vv. 27–28).

The “he” in verse 27a refers to God; the “his” to Christ, as verse 27b clarifies. As a representative of humanity, and doing what humans were supposed to have done but failed to do (i.e., exercise dominion over the cosmos—Gen. 1:28), Jesus remains ultimately subordinate to God. Compare Psalm 8:5, in which humanity, including Jesus in his incarnation (Heb. 2:9), was made “a little lower than the angels.” Here Paul quotes Psalm 8:6 to stress Christ’s corresponding conquests as well. The result is that God is “all in all,” that is, “pervasively sovereign.” Although God the Son is *essentially* equal to the Father, he remains *functionally* subordinate, just as his glorified humanity keeps him distinct from what he was prior to the incarnation.

In verses 29–34 Paul goes back to arguing the absurdity of denying the bodily resurrection. Here he uses three *ad hominem* and *ad hoc* arguments based on what he and the Corinthians were experiencing (note the references to “they” [NIV “those” and “people”] in v. 29, “us,” “we,” and “I” in vv. 30–32, and “you” as the implied subject of the commands in vv. 33–34).

The most puzzling of these is the first. Despite all sorts of ingenious alternatives that have been suggested, the plain meaning of verse 29 remains that of some sort of proxy baptism. Early church fathers allude to such a practice among second-century Gnostic and Gnostic-like groups, in which living believers were baptized on behalf of those in their sect or group who had died without being baptized (cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.10; Chrysostom’s *Homily on 1 Cor.* 40.1; Epiphanius, *Heresies* 28; and Philaster, *Heresies* 49). Given the Corinthians’ tendencies toward early Gnostic belief and practice, it is not difficult to imagine something similar having begun among at least a few in Corinth already in the first century. Paul neither condemns nor condones such a practice but argues for its irrelevance if Christ is not raised. In other words, those who are baptizing people on behalf of the dead contradict their own theology that denies the resurrection. The Corinthians might well have replied that they performed such baptisms for the sake of disembodied souls, but Paul is convinced that without a body there is no further life at all.

In verses 30–32 Paul turns to a parallel pair of arguments from his own experience. Why should he continue to tolerate hostility from others and risk his life for the sake of the gospel if there is no hope of resurrection? Second Corinthians 11:23b–29 sheds light on the kinds of trials he has had to endure. In verse 31, “I mean that” translates a Greek word used to introduce an oath or solemn declaration of the truth of a particular statement. “Just as surely as I glory over you” translates the three Greek words, “by your boast,” and more naturally refers

to the Corinthians boasting in Paul. But since there was little evidence that they were doing that, the NIV may be correct.

Verse 32 is almost certainly not to be taken literally. Roman citizens were exempt from being thrown to animals in the gladiator's ring, and Paul would not have easily survived such an encounter. In fact, language about fighting wild beasts was regularly used metaphorically for human opposition (cf. esp. Ignatius, *Romans* 5:1). Some think he is referring to the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23–41), but that seems to have occurred just before he left town (Acts 20:1) and therefore after writing this letter (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8). Paul may be alluding to some otherwise unknown personal attack or persecution that threatened his life. Second Corinthians 1:8–11 seems to look back on such an event. One early tradition claims that Paul was temporarily imprisoned in Ephesus, and some modern scholars believe that he wrote Philippians and/or the other Prison Letters (Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon) during such an imprisonment. We simply do not have enough evidence to know for sure what danger he was recalling here.

Verse 32b reflects the flip side of the logic of verse 19. If this life is all there is, then people ought to “live it up,” as the Epicureans did. Paul cites their most famous slogan, as the prophet Isaiah and the author of Ecclesiastes had done centuries earlier (Isa. 22:13; Eccl. 2:24). But he immediately proceeds to reject such logic, since Christ has in fact been raised. Instead he quotes another popular Greek proverb, this one first attributed to the fourth-century B.C. comic playwright Menander (v. 33). Those who deny the resurrection make for “bad company,” and their dualistic presuppositions (“matter doesn't matter”) foster immoral behavior (as in chaps. 5–6). Paul appeals to the Corinthians to reject this route (v. 34) by again chiding them for their lack of *gnosis* and by trying to shame them into repentance (cf. 6:5).

THE RESURRECTION BRINGS US to the very center of the Christian faith. When Paul was on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, he summed up the charge against him as his “hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6; cf. 24:21; 26:6–8). When he clothed the gospel for the Athenians in almost entirely different garb, he nevertheless still focused on “Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). His emphasis on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 in no way contradicts 2:2—Christ's death and resurrection are inseparable. Without the latter, the former has no eternal significance. To counteract those who play down the weakness and servanthood of Jesus, Paul must stress the crucifixion, but to refute those who deny a future material hope for believers and the cosmos, he must stress Jesus' bodily resurrection. Historically, the Eastern Orthodox have best highlighted the resurrection; the Roman Catholics, the crucifixion. Protestants have alternately magnified elements of each. Both remain crucial.

Although emphases may vary from culture to culture, particularly according to the objections to belief in the resurrection that emerge in each, this doctrine must remain at the core of Christian theology. Applying this chapter requires a comparison between first-century beliefs about life after death and similar beliefs in other cultures. Then the uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and its significance can appear more clearly. In Paul's day, almost everyone held to a supernatural worldview that encouraged belief at least in life after death. Most Greeks and Romans, however, did not see that this entailed bodily resurrection. In modern cultures influenced by the skepticism of the Enlightenment, this supernatural

worldview is not shared, so we have to defend both the *possibility* and the *need* for bodily resurrection.

Verses 1–2 stress what this chapter will continually repeat, most notably in verses 12–19 and 29–32, that Christian belief without the doctrine of bodily resurrection proves worthless. Verses 3–7 offer a strong apologetic for the reality of Christ’s being raised. Given the early date of 1 Corinthians (ca. A.D. 55) and the likelihood of Paul relying on formalized oral tradition that substantially predates the letter, we are indeed in touch with very early testimony. Paul, of course, used this tradition to call wayward believers back to that which they once firmly maintained. But we may also use these verses to argue the case for the resurrection with unbelievers. So too we are reminded of what must remain central doctrine even for mature believers, tempted to move away to peripheral matters. The absolute fundamentals of the faith include the genuine humanity and deity of Christ (making real death and real resurrection possible, respectively), his vicarious atonement, his bodily resurrection, and the authority of the Scriptures, which are twice appealed to in verses 3–4 to corroborate the significance of the historical events described.

These appeals to the Old Testament, as elsewhere in the New Testament, raise questions for us and remind us that the first Christian writers saw all of Scripture pointing to Christ. Indeed, Jesus himself during his resurrection appearances solidified such a hermeneutic in his disciples’ minds (Luke 24:25–27). This involved use of such well-known Jewish techniques as typology, midrash, peshar and so on. As we grope today to find specific Scriptures that “predict” the resurrection, we recognize that we have entered a world in which prophecy did much more than provide straightforward predictions that were literally fulfilled at a later date in history. At the same time, we must not overlook the significance of Acts 2:30–31, in which Peter claims that at least David understood more directly the prediction of the Messiah’s resurrection. Because David was told that one of his descendants would always sit on his throne (2 Sam. 7:13–14), he may have received a clearer understanding than most of his contemporaries of the ministry of the coming Christ.

The contents of the early Christian “creed” embedded in verses 3–7 also refute all the classic suggestions that have been made down through the centuries to account for the origin of resurrection faith apart from a literal bodily resurrection. That “Christ died” disputes the claim that he merely swooned and recovered in the tomb. “That he was buried” renders implausible the views that the disciples stole his body or that the women went to the wrong tomb. Eventually a body could have been produced and the disciples’ story laid to rest. The verb *ophthe* (“appeared”) refers more naturally to an objective reality that the disciples saw rather than to some subjective vision (as might more plausibly be the case with the word *horama*—“vision”). The number of witnesses and numerous occasions on which Christ appeared seem to rule out mass hallucination. By mentioning Jesus’ appearance to two people who did not previously believe in him (Paul and James), Paul refutes the contention that the appearances were the projections of individuals who had so much personally invested in Christ that they simply couldn’t imagine him remaining dead.

We do not have enough data to demonstrate how the various resurrection appearances cited here fit in with all of the accounts of the four Gospels, but it is important to stress that none of these data necessarily contradicts any other. Plausible harmonizations have been



offered. Charges that the New Testament writers cannot agree on the details remain highly misleading.

Paul's primary purpose in his list of witnesses, however, is to prepare the way for a reference to his own encounter with the risen Christ. He omits mention of the women to whom Jesus appeared (Matt. 28:8–10; John 20:10–18), probably because they were not considered authoritative or valid legal witnesses in much of the ancient world. By singling out the private appearances to Peter and James in verses 5 and 7a, he anticipates his own personal experience in verse 7b. Whatever authority their witness to the resurrection confers on them (or on any of the other apostles), he can lay a legitimate claim to equal authority. That his experience of Jesus on the Damascus road may have been somewhat more subjective (cf. the different experience of his companions in Acts 9:7) does not render the pre-ascension appearances more subjective too. Rather Paul is claiming that, notwithstanding these distinctive elements, his experience was as objective as the earlier apostles' encounters.

Verse 10 reminds us that Paul does not dislike good works! As in Ephesians 2:10, he agrees with James that faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:14–26). Or to use Paul's language, faith necessarily works itself out through love (Gal. 5:6). Here is no cheap grace; rather God's mercy produces more diligent effort on Paul's part than had he merely merited God's favor.

Verses 12–19 return to the theme of the absolute necessity of bodily resurrection, both for Christ and for believers, in order for Christian faith to be genuine or valid. Paul does not permit a perspective on Jesus that views him merely as a good, moral teacher or on Christianity that considers it simply an admirable collection of proverbial truths about how to live. If the resurrection is false, Christianity is worthless. If Christ was not raised, death, the penalty for sin, is not conquered. And his death in particular could not provide forgiveness of our sins, since it would not have eradicated death (cf. Rom. 3:23–25; 4:25). Above all, Paul did not experience enough natural enjoyment or "self-realization" in his life of constant turmoil and persecution to see any point in continuing the struggle if it were based on a myth.

But the reality of the resurrection gives him great hope (vv. 20–28). This life is not all that there is, nor is life after death mere immortality of the soul, though it does include that (cf. verse 53). Though the word "sleep" (vv. 18, 20) was used widely in the ancient world, it is an especially appropriate euphemism for death in Christian circles, since we look forward to "awakening" one day to our new bodies. But the metaphor does not necessarily imply the doctrine of "soul-sleep"—that is, a lack of conscious awareness of the presence of God in between death and resurrection. And 2 Corinthians 5:8 and Philippians 1:23 are more naturally interpreted as referring to an intermediate state between these two events that involves conscious, disembodied existence.

Neither may verse 22 be taken to support any doctrine of universalism (that eventually all people will be saved). Our previous discussion has already noted that "all will be made alive" must refer to "all who are in Christ," that is, believers. Paul simply does not address the question of the fate of unbelievers in this passage. Other Scriptures, however, point to a bodily resurrection for them as well, not for glorification but for eternal punishment (e.g., Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:46; John 5:29; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev. 20:11–15). Verse 23 does not necessarily support a doctrine of the millennium, but it at least allows for it. The adverbs in verses 23b–24a, "then ... then" (Gk. *epeita ... eita*), often but not always refer to a sequence of events with a period of time in between. Given the substantial gap between Christ's resurrection and his return (v.

23b), it is natural to assume a similar gap prior to the final destruction of all his enemies (v. 24a), as Revelation 20 seems to teach. But we cannot be sure, and one's views on numerous other parts of Scripture must be considered before arriving at a position on the millennium.

Verses 24–28 remind us of our discussion of women's issues under 11:2–16. Clearly, Paul teaches here an ultimate subordination of the Son to the Father (in function, not essence). Therefore, to the extent that he bases relationships between men and women or husbands and wives on the analogy of the Godhead (11:3), functional subordination remains appropriate in the spheres of home and ministry too. Perhaps Paul is not drawing the analogy that tightly, but if he is, it will not do to dismiss Christ's subordination to the Father as limited just to his time on earth. On the other hand, we dare not jettison his equality of essence or we revert to Arianism and leave the door open for Christ to be viewed as a created being. Neither may verse 28 be interpreted in a pantheistic light, as if God's being "all in all" meant that he was indistinguishable from the created order. Rather, as we have already observed (p. 298), this text makes an absolute claim for God's ultimate sovereignty and lordship.

Given the plethora of suggestions for interpreting verse 29, we dare not be dogmatic in upholding any one of them. But given Paul's parallel reasoning in verses 30–32, an *ad hoc* understanding seems best. Paul points out the logical implications of the Corinthians' behavior without passing judgment on it one way or the other. We need not shrink from admitting that some of the Corinthians, along with all their other problems, were baptizing people on behalf of unbaptized, deceased believers or inquirers into the faith. *We must simply insist that Paul is in no way condoning the practice*, any more than he approves of the fact that he daily suffers hardships (vv. 30–31) or that he "fought wild beasts in Ephesus" (v. 32). These are simply unfortunate realities that Paul uses as a springboard for furthering his contention for the truth of resurrection. Why continue with them if there is no hope beyond the grave? So there remains no justification for making any of these practices prescriptive rather than descriptive, and certainly no evidence that Christians ever considered proxy baptism valid for total unbelievers. Both of these observations, therefore, contradict historic Mormon belief and practice, despite their appeal to verse 29 for support. What is more, no Scripture ever suggests that salvation is transferable from one individual to another apart from their personal belief in this life, and Matthew 25:9 most likely rules out such transfer.

Some readers are surprised that Paul uses an oath in verse 31, after Christ's apparent prohibition of all oaths in Matthew 5:33–37. But that prohibition is not so sweeping as at first glance it appears. Paul uses oaths elsewhere too (2 Cor. 1:18 and Gal. 1:20), while Jesus is concerned to abolish the elaborate casuistry that encumbered typical first-century Jewish practice. His followers should be people whose words are so characterized by integrity that others need no formal assurance of their truthfulness in order to trust them. But in writing the Corinthians (as with the Galatians), Paul has to resort to extreme measures to counter their growing mistrust of him.

Verse 32b points out how self-indulgence is the consistent outgrowth of a material philosophy that denies the resurrection life. The Epicureans of old did not usually interpret their slogan as a call to sheer gluttony and drunkenness. Rather they sought the "good life," cultivating the arts of fine dining, music and theater, and treasured friendships. Yet ultimately all of this was self-centered, since they did not look to continuing any pleasures beyond the

grave. Self-interest may even lead to humanitarian and altruistic concerns, but ultimately it produces nothing permanently satisfying if this life is all that exists.

Christians must have a radically different mind-set. Recognizing that a far better life awaits them, they can risk their lives or well-being for the gospel in ways other people would not be willing to emulate. In Christian ethics, physical death cannot be the greatest tragedy that determines correct human behavior. Rather one must ask what is likely to lead to the spiritual salvation of the most number of people and to avoid the physical (and therefore spiritual) deaths of the greatest number of unbelievers. Snyder puts it well:

The resurrection addresses those who insist on protection and security of the individual, institutions, and country. Such persons set up mechanisms of defense along economic, racial, and national lines....

In sharp contrast, the life of the Spirit, with its hope in the resurrection, does not, indeed, cannot, dwell on preservation of the flesh (personhood, institutions, nations). Rather the corporate life of the Christian becomes one of risk. A Christian hospital can accept more welfare patients than economically advisable because it knows God's love for the poor does not depend on its continued existence.... Christians can call for total disarmament in the midst of a cold war because they know the future of the world does not depend on the survival of their nation. A Christian can risk his or her life because a Christian knows this life is not the end.

Verse 33 proves widely applicable and reminds us that Christians do not become the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16) automatically. Our persistent sinful nature continues to try to corrupt us when we are surrounded by people engaged in sinful practices, unless we take deliberate, conscious action to the contrary. Verse 34a highlights how immorality often flows from false theology. We recall the sexual sin that stemmed from the Corinthians' divorce of body and spirit (chaps. 5–6). Verse 34b reminds us again that shame or guilt can be an appropriate motivation to corrective action when we are objectively guilty and engaged in shameful behavior. But it can be overdone and misapplied as well.

Finally, an important objection to Paul's line of thought throughout this half-chapter must be considered. Many Greeks and Romans in Corinth, like many people today, might well have asked, "Why isn't immortality of the soul enough?" Why not merely affirm that Christ's spirit lives on and that our spirits can also live forever with his? First Corinthians does not directly answer this question. Paul apparently relied on his audience to understand his Jewish background or recall his previous teaching on the topic.

But Scripture's teaching elsewhere points us in the direction of an answer. Against the Greco-Roman dualism that treated matter as inherently evil, the Bible declares that God created the material world, including human bodies, as good (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Humans were intended to live in bodily form in a material world. Revelation 21–22 describes God's ultimate re-creation of new heavens *and a new earth* in equally material terms. In other words, God intends to see that his original creative purposes are not thwarted. Anything less than full bodily resurrection and full re-creation of the cosmos might still give believers an enjoyable experience but would not vindicate God against all his enemies or provide the absolute perfection that he intends for his people.

DENYING THE REALITY of the resurrection remains a central problem in contemporary culture. Atheism usually rejects the possibility of the existence of all supernatural powers, often claiming support in the “findings” of modern science. But with revolutions in modern physics associated with Einstein and Heisenberg, scientists who understand their discipline are often more reluctant to rule out God and the supernatural on scientific grounds than are students of the humanities and even of world religions! Historians usually recognize the absurdity of most of the proposed alternatives to the resurrection—the swoon theory, the stolen body or wrong tomb, mass hallucination, and so on, though that does not stop more popular writers from continuing to perpetuate such nonsense.<sup>27</sup>

Far more common in scholarly circles, however, is the view that resurrection language expresses theological truths in mythological garb, and that some kind of subjective experience of the disciples’ faith was transformed over time into the biblical narratives that claim to describe more objective realities. There are numerous problems with this approach, but the most important are these: (1) The disciples were nowhere close to being in a psychological mood favorable to belief in a resurrection (John 20:19). (2) Without a genuinely empty tomb, it is incredible that Christians never came to venerate a holy site in which their founder was supposedly buried, as did most other world religions. (3) Early on, Jesus’ disciples stopped worshiping on the Sabbath (Saturday) in favor of Sunday, the first day of the week (e.g., Acts 20:7). But why should they abandon one of the very Ten Commandments so central to Judaism unless some genuinely historical event like the resurrection had occurred on that other day as a powerful stimulus for change? (4) The development from spiritual to bodily resurrection makes sense had Christianity moved from Greek to Jewish circles, but not when it in fact progressed in the opposite direction.

Christ’s death and resurrection in space and time, as bona fide historical events, actually set Christianity apart from all its major rivals. Later Western religions that developed in part in reaction to Christianity do not claim deity or resurrections for their originators, merely prophetic status (e.g., Mohammed in Islam or Joseph Smith in Mormonism). Older Eastern religions do not even require the actual historical existence of their founders for their beliefs and practices to make sense. In some ways they are more akin to philosophies than to historical truth-claims (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism). But Christianity lives or dies with the claim of Christ’s resurrection. To be sure, it is possible to believe in Jesus’ resurrection and not become a Christian,<sup>30</sup> but without the bodily resurrection Christianity crumbles. Finding the bones of Jesus would assuredly disprove our religion!

So it is appropriate to insist on the resurrection not only as the center of contemporary faith but also of contemporary apologetics. But recent evangelical apologetics has at times been one-sidedly rationalistic. Paul’s appeal to his own personal experience of the risen Christ (v. 8) to balance the historical facts he had learned (vv. 3–7) means that we too may consider our personal encounters with Jesus as an equally legitimate part of the defense of our faith. On the other hand, without the appeal to historical facts, we have no way of mediating between the competing claims of largely parallel personal experiences. Mormons, Buddhists, and Christians alike often testify today to some strong feeling or spiritual encounter that “confirmed” the truth of their faith. But since these three religions contradict each other at important points, all cannot be simultaneously true. Christians must appeal to more than a personal testimony; they must recognize the historical evidence that is on their side.

Saddest of all are the examples of professing Christians, particularly within liberalism, who think they are bolstering the faith in a scientific age by relegating the resurrection to outmoded mythology. In so doing, they turn out to be most misguided of all, because they undermine the very core of what they seek to support. But evangelicalism has its counterparts, as with those who so stress the earthly benefits of belief that Christianity would seem to be a desirable lifestyle irrespective of what happens after death.<sup>33</sup> People who promote such perspectives have never walked in Paul's shoes or, for that matter, in the footsteps of a sizable number of Christians and martyrs throughout church history, who would have quickly abandoned their faith if it were not for hope of eternal reward for the misery experienced in the here and now (cf. vv 19, 30–32).

The non-Christian West today is increasingly implementing the Epicureanism of verse 32b. In more Christian societies, unbelievers at least outwardly have often imitated Christian lifestyles or have felt social pressure to curb their most excessively immoral behavior. But increasingly, we are seeing a culture that refuses to put on the brakes at all. The "Baby Boomers," including many professing Christians, are in debt up to their eyeballs. Advertisements bombard us daily with what we *have* to have immediately. Sexual morals continue to deteriorate, so that what was unthinkable for most non-Christians in another era—addiction to pornography, repeated acts of adultery, or incestuous behavior—is now widely practiced, even at times among those who profess to be born again. Worldwide, consistent indulgence in self-interest has given rise to tribalism and ethnic wars that atheistic Communism once held in check and that humanistic evolution cannot explain.

But even where industrialism and technological advance give rise to the concept of "developed" nations, materialist philosophy fails to satisfy. So we are seeing the rise of the New Age movement, in many respects a reversion to pantheism or ancient Gnostic and earth-mother religions. Reincarnation is in vogue. Interest in the cults and the occult is booming. As authentic Christian spirituality is rejected, counterfeits will take their place to fill the "God-shaped vacuum" in each human heart, to use Pascal's famous expression. Popular culture and media have an intense fascination with life after death, initiated particularly by Kübler-Ross's studies of near-death experiences. Blockbuster movies invent fictitious accounts of those who die and yet live on, or come back to interact in various ways with those still living on earth.

Yet almost without exception, this fascination for the afterlife resembles more the Corinthians' false teaching than orthodox Christianity. Seldom are persons depicted as having fully human bodies in their next life. Rarely does that next life seem incomparably more desirable than the present one. And virtually never are the destinies of Christians and non-Christians appropriately distinguished. Either all people are seen as going to "heaven," or else they are distinguished on the basis of how good or bad they were during their time on earth.

A faulty theology of the resurrection plagues competing world religions in other respects too. Millions of young Muslims have tragically allowed themselves to be killed in war and terrorism, believing that martyrdom speeds their way to heaven. Mormons try to work their way up the ladder of extra-terrestrial privilege and power. Jehovah's Witnesses hope that sufficient obedience will enable them to be one of the 144,000 who get to enjoy the new heavens as well as the new earth. Eastern religionists hope for *nirvana*—to be absorbed into the cosmic consciousness, which is all that there really is. Against all of these perspectives Paul's absolute dogmatism challenges the prevailing tolerance of a pluralistic age. If Christianity

is right, Paul would virtually shout, then these perspectives are damning, and people should be warned against them in the most forthright language. But if the Christian hope of resurrection is wrong, then all these other perspectives *are still wrong*, for the only other consistent alternative is total annihilation at death. Then we should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. The proliferation of alternate worldviews shows how the human instinct recoils at such nihilism. But that in itself is backhanded testimony to the Christian truths that humans are created in God's image, yet have sinned and so distorted that image that they consistently look for inadequate substitutes.

Evangelical Christians must shoulder some of the blame, however, for the unpopularity of biblical teaching about the life to come. Too many pew sitters in contemporary conservative churches think of and represent heaven as an "airy-fairy," ethereal kind of existence to which they do not really look forward. Even referring to the life to come simply as "heaven" points out a serious misconception. **The biblical hope is for believers to experience all of the wonders and glories of a fully re-created heavens and earth (Rev. 21–22).** We will enjoy one another's fellowship as well as God's presence in perfect happiness. We will not sit on our private clouds with wings and harps periodically to dispel our eternal boredom! The new earth is centered in the new Jerusalem, a *city* of bustling activity.

Not only have Christians tended to make the life to come unattractive, but our generation in the West is one of few in human history that has so consistently tried to create Paradise on earth in this life. Previous generations often lampooned certain kinds of Christians for being so heavenly-minded that they were no earthly good. It is doubtful if many such people under the age of fifty currently exist in our country. Instead, ours is a generation in which many Christians are so earthly minded that they are no heavenly good. Our society, and Christians often as much as anyone else in that society, has become preoccupied with physical health, dieting, recreation, and fitness, all at the expense of anything close to a comparable concern for spiritual health and salvation.

Yet incurable diseases, unexpected accidents, and periodic exposure to the horrors of the less affluent parts of our world continue to point out the sheer inadequacy of such preoccupations. Sooner or later we will die, and some of us will suffer quite a bit before we do. We need to recapture the longing for the life to come, which enabled Paul to declare confidently even in his most difficult moments: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Or again, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:17). Most of us consider our truly minor physical afflictions far more serious than Paul's catalogues of horrible sufferings, and yet he could call *them* "light and momentary"!

**An appropriate perspective** on the life to come will further enable us to risk our lives for the sake of boldly testifying to Christ in dangerous situations at home and abroad. It will also give us a balanced perspective on the gospel we boldly preach. With much contemporary liberation theology, it is crucial to see our task as including social activism that works to eradicate poverty and liberate the physically oppressed throughout our world today. But many are dying daily before we can get to them, and some will continue to do so until Christ returns. So, against much liberation theology, we dare never truncate our gospel so that we do not simultaneously offer the spiritual deliverance that only Jesus can give and that alone can spare humans from an eternity far more unpleasant than anything they have experienced in this life.

In more modest ways, understanding Paul's theology of resurrection should affect our personal and corporate prayer life. How often do our lists of requests involve almost exclusively physical or material needs? How many of us could commend one another as John did Gaius in praying that his circumstances in this life might find him as healthy physically and materially as he already was spiritually (3 John 2)?

The resurrection hope gives purpose and meaning to all of human history. Christians need not fear that the world will end in a nuclear holocaust, because Scripture teaches that the end of this age comes with Christ's return. And although the world's armies are depicted as amassing for a final battle, Christ intervenes before his people suffer a single casualty (Rev. 19:17–19). This does not mean, however, that we should not take every precaution to guard against a limited nuclear accident that could still inflict more damage and suffering on the earth than it has ever experienced. Nor may we ever consider abortion or euthanasia as a way out of human suffering. God always has a purpose for humans whom he keeps alive.

On the other hand, God's ultimate purposes will be realized only after Jesus comes again. So we must not delude ourselves with the naive optimism that counts on us gradually Christianizing the earth this side of Christ's return. Rather we look forward to the world ending with neither a whimper nor a bang, but with Christ's universal, public, visible return to inaugurate the series of events that will culminate with God's absolute sovereignty being acknowledged throughout the cosmos (vv. 24–28).

In this vein, however, we must beware of a growing evangelical fascination with universalism and other unlikely alternatives concerning the fate of unbelievers (e.g., a second chance after death, annihilationism, or conditional immortality). People will not be saved irrespective of their attitude toward Jesus. Still, evangelicals have perhaps been too narrow or myopic in the last few generations when it comes to the question of the fate of the unevangelized. Orthodox Christianity has historically held a greater diversity of perspectives on the destiny of those who have never heard the gospel than has recent conservative theology. The real dividing point may not be whether a person has ever heard of the name of Jesus or not but whether he or she is relying solely on God's grace, to whatever extent it is understood, or trusting in his or her own self-righteousness.<sup>39</sup> Such a principle might conceivably let a few who have never heard into the kingdom (and the assumption must be that if they had heard they would have responded positively). It almost certainly means that many who *think* they are in are not—including some professing Christians!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Blomberg, C. (1994). [\*1 Corinthians\*](#) (pp. 294–313). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.