

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is concerned with the resurrection of the dead, and with the resurrection of believers in particular.

We need to look at verses 12, 34 and 35 in particular to fill in the background – ‘Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame. But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?"’.

Note the references to ‘*some*’ in verses 12 and 34, and to ‘*someone*’ in verse 35. The questions posed in verse 35 clearly weren’t genuine questions or enquiries. They expressed the principal objection of certain false teachers at Corinth to the doctrine of resurrection – namely, that it was patently *absurd*. ‘Go on then’, they’re saying, ‘explain to us *the mechanics* of dead people being raised – and *with what sort* of body do you imagine they’re going to come?’ The questions were then a crude attempt to mock and belittle faith in resurrection. Hence Paul’s sharp retort in verse 36 – ‘Fool’. Paul was in no mood to mince words because he was confronting – not some sincere enquirer *after truth* – but a determined scoffer *at truth*.

We learn then that there were ‘*some*’ within the church itself who denied the resurrection of the dead – and – by definition – the resurrection of believers. Paul doesn’t fill in any details about who the ‘*some*’ were. He didn’t need to – the Corinthians knew well enough.

We note that the statement of verse 32 – ‘If the dead do not rise, ‘let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ – only makes sense if the false teachers denied *any kind of life after death*. It is clear, that is, that they denied the truth of resurrection for much same reason as did the Jewish sect of the Sadducees¹ – namely, that when they die men and women cease to exist altogether – that there is nothing at all beyond what Paul calls in verse 19 ‘this life’. The false teachers at Corinth had no more time for faith in the immortality of the soul than they did for faith in the resurrection of the body. In all likelihood they belonged to - or at the very least were strongly influenced by - the Epicurean school of philosophy – representatives of which Paul had encountered at Athens shortly before his first missionary visit to Corinth, Acts 17. 18; 18. 1.

Biblically, the words ‘let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die!’, verse 32, were reminiscent of the burden of Isaiah the prophet in chapter 22 of his book, ‘In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth: And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die’, Isa. 22. 12-13. But they also represented a well-known Epicurean maxim which went to sum up much of its philosophy. And Saul of Tarsus would have been familiar with this philosophy better than most. The traditional founder of Tarsus was a character named Sardanapalus. The neighbouring town of Anchiæ boasted a large statue of Sardanapalus, sitting and snapping his fingers contemptuously. The inscription on the pedestal of the statue read, ‘Sardanapalus ... built Anchiæ and Tarsus in one day ... eat, drink and enjoy yourself - for all the rest is nothing’.² Paul would certainly have known of Sardanapalus, and quite likely have seen the actual statue.

Separately, in verse 33 Paul quotes a saying of the Greek writer Menander, ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’ – possibly, corrupts good character or good morals’. Menander wrote a series of comedies and plays around 300 BC, and his works were still very popular in Paul’s day. Paul was writing to the Corinthians from Ephesus – and interestingly, archaeologists – when excavating in the vicinity of the theatre of Ephesus in 1967³ – unearthed a house decorated throughout with theatrical scenes from Menander’s comedies.⁴ We gather therefore that Menander was well known, and well liked, in the city from which Paul wrote his epistle - and Menander was a well-known Epicurean.

It seems likely therefore that the ‘*some*’ about whom Paul wrote were, to say the least, tinged with Epicurean teaching. According to verse 34, although these men had no real knowledge of God at all, to the Corinthians’ shame, they were tolerated in the church. They weren’t true Christians at all and yet, Paul says, the ‘*some*’ are ‘among you’, verse 12. They may have been few in number but their doctrine was highly dangerous, attacking as it did the very foundations of the Christian gospel. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the apostle devoted such a large amount of space to combating their error.

By way of an overview of the chapter ...

Verses 1-34 deal with the *denial* of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. The section ends with the practical implication of believing that *this life is all that there is*, verse 32 - namely to live a life of self-indulgence. If I am to die as the beast, then why shouldn’t I live as the beast.

Verses 35-58 deal with the *main intellectual objection* to the doctrine. The section ends with the practical implication of believing that *this life is not all that there is*, verse 58. If for us as believers there is a real heaven the

other side of death and a time of review for all our service, then we should live for God and be energetic and resolute in our labour for the Lord.

The first half of the chapter comprises two main sections : namely, verses 1-19 and verses 20-34. Each section consists (i) of a block of teaching, which occupies verses 1-11 and verses 20-28, followed (ii) by the implications of denying that particular teaching, which occupies verses 12-19 and verses 29-34.

In verses 1-11, Paul asserts that the resurrection of *Christ* forms ***an essential and integral part of the apostolic gospel***. **In verses 20-28**, Paul asserts that the resurrection of *the believer* forms ***an essential and integral part of God's programme for the future***.

The first section looks *backward* – transporting us into the realm of *history*. The second section looks *forward* – projecting us into the realm of *prophecy*.

In verses 12-19, Paul draws out ***the implications of denying*** that *Christ* has been raised - note the words, '*if Christ has not been raised*', verses 14,17 lit.

In verses 29-34, Paul draws out ***the implications of denying*** that *the believer* will be raised - note the words, '*if the dead are not raised*', verses 29, 32 lit.

Verses 1-11 demonstrate that the resurrection of Christ forms an essential and integral part of the apostolic gospel.

Paul begins by asserting that the resurrection of Christ lies at the very heart and centre of the gospel – that it is of fundamental importance – and offers eyewitness evidence for its historical reality, verses 1-11. *The relevance* of this section to Paul's overall argument lies in that any denial of the resurrection of *the dead* necessarily involves the denial of the resurrection of *Christ*, verses 13, 16. For it follows logically that, if there is no such thing as resurrection, then *nobody* has ever been raised – and that includes Jesus.

The block of teaching about the resurrection of Christ is sandwiched between two references to what was 'preached' by the early church. Paul opens with a reference to 'the gospel which *I preached*', **verse 1** – namely that message which he had preached in the past to the Corinthians, and he closes with the expression 'whether it was I or they, so *we preach*', verse 11 – namely that message which he and others were still preaching. Paul is at pains to emphasise the point that the resurrection of Christ is inescapably part and parcel of the apostolic gospel.

It is also, he says, the gospel they had *received*, in which they stood and by which they were being saved, verses 1-2. They had '*received*' it from Paul, verse 1, just as *he* in turn had '*received*' it, verse 3 – presumably from the Lord Himself. As he had said to the Galatians in chapter 1 of his letter – 'the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither *received* it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ', Gal. 1. 11-12.

He had 'delivered' to them four key statements as of 'first' importance – that is, of primary, of fundamental importance – four simple propositions which stood at the very forefront of his message, **verses 3-5**. These four statements are each introduced with the word '*that*'.

The first and third statements – that 'Christ died' and 'He rose again' – are distinguished from the second and fourth – that 'He was buried' and 'was seen' – by the addition of explanatory details – 'for our sins' and 'the third day' – and by the claim to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy – 'according to the Scriptures'. It was said of the temple of Dagon at Gaza that there were 'two middle pillars upon which the house stood', Jud. 16. 29. So too, metaphorically speaking, the gospel stands on two great central pillars – the death and resurrection of Jesus – as Paul constantly made clear – for example in Rom. 14. 9 (lit.) – 'to this end Christ died and lived again' – and in 1 Thess. 4. 14 – 'if we believe that Jesus died and rose again'.

The second and fourth statements – that He 'was buried' and 'was seen' – function as *supporting evidence and proof* for the first and third statements. They tell us what *men* did. Christ *died* – and one of the ways we know that He died is that *men buried Him*. He *rose again* – and one of the ways we know that He rose again is that *men saw Him*. Interestingly, when recording the crucifixion of our Lord, not one of the gospel writers actually use the word 'died'.⁵ In contrast, Paul on no less than 21 occasions refers either to the 'death' of the Lord or to the fact that He 'died'.⁶ And, as Paul makes clear *He 'died for our sins'*, **verse 3**, that *we* might not remain *in* them! For, if He hadn't died and risen, we would be 'still in' our 'sins', verse 17, and, even worse, as was the case with the Jews to whom Jesus once spoke, we would die in them, John 8. 24.

'He rose again', **verse 4**, is literally '*He has been raised*'. The tense which Paul uses to describe Jesus' resurrection differs radically from which he used in the other three propositions. In each of the other three cases, the tense refers to a single act – to one historical event. There was a moment when He died. There was a moment when He was buried. There was a moment when He was seen by Cephas – the Aramaic for 'Peter'. But the tense which Paul uses to describe Jesus' resurrection indicates that, in this case, the effect continues – the result

remains right up to the present. In a word, *He is the living Lord!* And Paul underlines this particular point by using the same tense no less than seven times between here and verse 20.⁷ in the immediate context

The main point which Paul is pressing home on the Corinthians is that – as far as the gospel is concerned – the resurrection of Jesus isn't some minor incidental – some dispensable detail – some unimportant ingredient. It ranks 'of first importance' – of the utmost importance – being one of the two events which comprise the very foundation of the gospel.

In support of his claim that the Lord Jesus 'has been raised', Paul is able to appeal not only to the witness of the Old Testament prophets, verse 4, but to that of the New Testament apostles and others, verses 5-8. Paul chooses his witnesses carefully – citing just six occasions on which the risen Lord appeared – on three occasions to individuals and on three occasions to groups. He focuses on accessible, credible, publicly acceptable witnesses – for the most part men who were prominent and conspicuous in the church. His catalogue of witnesses stretches from Peter – the first man to see the risen Lord, Luke 24. 34 – through 'all the apostles' – finally to himself.

When we read of the 'over five hundred brethren at once', **verse 6**, we should remember that Paul was writing no more than twenty-five years after the event. And most of these 'brethren', he points out, were still alive, and therefore still available to be called as witnesses. The apostle isn't afraid that someone might call his bluff. If required to, he could produce the witnesses.

The expression 'at once' – at one time, lit. – rules out any question of hallucination. And twenty-five years certainly hadn't allowed sufficient time for some myth or legend to be invented. 'Some have fallen asleep', verse 6, is a lovely way to describe the bodily condition of dead Christians – a delightful euphemism which not only conjures up pictures of rest and peace – but conveys the promise that in due course the body will itself awake.

Paul's words 'last of all He was seen by me', **verse 8**, make it clear that the appearances of the risen Lord ceased as abruptly as they had commenced – again ruling out the possibility of hallucinations. Paul's own encounter with Jesus is distinguished from the experience of the others he mentions by the fact that he had seen Jesus after He had gone back to heaven. And his life hadn't not been so fundamentally changed by any encounter with a dead religious leader!

Paul's mention of his own conversion in **verse 8** leads him to digress for a moment. He is quick to acknowledge his own unworthiness – describing himself as 'one born out of due time' – as 'a still-born babe' lit. In all probability, this was a term of abuse hurled at Paul by his foes at Corinth. The Roman historian Suetonius told how, in the days of Emperor Augustus, the people branded as 'still-born ones' those Roman senators who were unworthy of office and who had been elected only as a result of bribery and pulling strings. It was, that is, a term of contempt for someone deemed to be unworthy of high office. Here, the apostle is acknowledging himself to be no more 'worthy' – 'sufficient' lit. – to be called an apostle than a still-born baby is fit to be called a man. But although Paul confessed that he *wasn't worthy* to be called an apostle, he knew equally well that he *was* called to be one, 1. 1.

Paul makes it clear in **verses 9-10** that he isn't disclaiming his fitness to be classed with the other apostles because he is in any way inferior to them by way of office or message – or because he fell behind them in terms of service or sufferings for Christ. Far from it! For he, the last apostolic recruit, excelled all others in active service and suffering, verse 10. His unworthiness stemmed only from what he *had been* before he became a Christian, verse 9. It's clear that, in one sense, Paul was unable to erase his past. He could never forget the role he had played as arch-persecutor of the early church. I've noted six separate occasions when he referred back to it – even as late as 1 Timothy 1 where he speaks of himself as having formerly been 'a blasphemer, and a persecutor'.⁸ Obviously this memory stayed with him throughout his Christian life.

What a change in atmosphere in **verse 10** – '*But by grace of God*'. 'Yes', Paul is saying, 'it is the very same *God* whose *church* I persecuted who bestowed His *grace* on me'. And this apostle stood in no doubt over what that church had cost God – He had obtained it with nothing less than the blood of His own Son, Acts 20.28! What incredible grace! And Paul is careful to attribute everything to God's undeserved favour shown to him – drawing attention to that 'grace' no less than three times in the one verse, verse 10. '*Thankfully*, Paul could have said,', Paul could have said, '*I'm not what I have been*', verse 9. '*Sadly*', he might have said, '*I'm not what I'm going to be*', verse 51. But it's sufficient for his present purpose that he is able to say, 'by the grace of God I am "*But by the grace of God I am what I am*', verse 10.

Verses 12-19 draw attention to some of the implications of denying that Christ has been raised.

I guess that, when it was first read, **verse 12** probably exploded like a bomb in the unsuspecting church at Corinth. The saints may well have been wondering when listening to the first eleven verses why the apostle should find it necessary to place such strong emphasis on the resurrection of Christ. Now they knew!

And it's clear that the majority of the saints at Corinth had simply failed to think through any of the devastating consequences of the denial of the truth of resurrection. The first, and most obvious, consequence – Paul points out in verses 13, 16 – is that 'if there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen' – 'for if the dead do not

rise, then Christ is not risen', verses 13, 16. And so, in **verses 14-19**, Paul proceeds to spell out seven implications of denying the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

1. 'Our preaching – our proclamation – is empty', **verse 14**. If Christ hadn't been raised out of the dead, then the proclamation of the apostles was *void of content* and substance. The gospel had been robbed of its contents. It was worthless.
2. And so too is our 'faith', Paul continues, **verse 14**. Because our faith rests foursquare on the gospel proclamation, it must share the same fate as that proclamation. If Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, our faith is therefore empty and worthless too.
3. 'And we are found false witnesses of God', **verse 15**. If Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, Paul and the other apostles stand convicted of misrepresenting God. We know from an earlier Old Testament quotation he made in this letter that the apostle was familiar with the character of Eliphaz the Temanite in the book of Job.⁹ He would therefore have known what the Lord Himself had said to Eliphaz towards the close of the book, 'the Lord's words to Eliphaz at the end of the book, 'My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you *have not spoken of me what is right*', Job 42. 7. Obviously it was no light thing to misrepresent God! To Paul it was an immensely serious matter – and if Christ hasn't been raised, then he, along with the other preachers of the gospel are proven guilty of just that.
4. And our faith 'is futile', **verse 17** – the word translated 'vain' being different to that in verse 14. If Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, our faith isn't only 'empty', verse 14 – it's ineffective. It's not only void of content, verse 14 – it's void of result. It's not only worthless, verse 14 – it's useless. It's not only worth nothing, verse 14 – it can do nothing.
5. And 'You are still in your sins', **verse 17**. Paul instances just one area where, if Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, our faith is ineffective – we are yet in our sins! If the Lord Jesus isn't risen, then He was, as the Jewish rulers insisted, a 'deceiver' – 'an impostor', Matt. 27. 63 – for He consistently staked His claims to be who He was on His forthcoming resurrection.¹⁰ Had He not been raised, His death would have been proven to have been no different to the death of other men. As such it would have had no value whatsoever as an offering for sin. But thank God – He 'who was delivered up because of our offences ... was raised because of our justification', Rom. 4. 25.
6. Then 'those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished', **verse 18**. If Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, there are serious consequences, Paul is saying, not only for us living Christians, verse 17, but for those who have already died. For, if Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, then those we describe as having 'fallen asleep' aren't really 'sleeping' at all – they have perished – eternally perished. And I guess that such words may have been particularly painful for Paul. Because, if that was how things were, they would have meant that Luke was mistaken when he wrote of Luke was wrong when he wrote of Stephen, the man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, to whose murder Paul had once consented, that he 'fell asleep', Acts 7. 60. For, if Christ hadn't been raised out of the dead, Stephen would 'have perished' under the stones which hailed down on him!
7. And, finally, 'we are of all men the most miserable' – 'we are the most to be pitied', **verse 19**. If Christ hasn't been raised out of the dead, Paul and his associates cannot themselves entertain any hope beyond the present life. Given that their present lives consisted largely of ceaseless toil and bitter persecution, they were surely of all men most to be pitied. 'To the present hour', Paul had written earlier, 'we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless ... we labour ... being reviled ... being persecuted ... being defamed We have been made as the filth - the garbage - of the world, the offscouring of all things until now', 4. 11-13. And there are 'some among you', he is now saying, 'who would have us believe that our expectation of a better world is doomed to bitter disappointment – that our confidence been entirely misplaced. If what these men teach is true, the world has more reason to feel sorry for us than for any others'.

And such – Paul observes – would be some of the implications of denying the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. With what joy of heart then must Paul have gone on to affirm loudly in **verse 20** – 'But now Christ has been raised from the dead'!

Turning from the resurrection of Christ to that of believer, Paul explains in **verses 20-28** that the resurrection of the Christian – and indeed that of all men – forms an essential and integral part of God's plan and purpose for future.

VERSE 20. Paul's outburst of overpowering conviction – 'But now Christ has been raised from among the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep'. I suspect that his reference to Christ as 'the firstfruits' suggested itself to him because, according to 16. 8, this letter was written in the run up to the feast of Pentecost, 16.8. That is, some time around the feasts of passover, unleavened bread and firstfruits. This may also explain why Paul introduced back in chapter 5 references to 'Christ our passover' and to the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, verses 6-8. The point here is that, as raised from the dead, Christ is the firstfruits of an abundant harvest – the pledge – the guarantee of the ingathering of the rest. But in what sense can the Lord Jesus be said to be the firstfruits? What about those cases of resurrection in days of Elijah and Elisha – or of several of Jesus' own miracles? In what sense could Paul inform King Agrippa in Acts 26 that, following His suffering, Christ 'was the first to rise from the dead', verse 23?

The apostle puts his finger in Rom. 6. 9 on that which distinguishes the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the other cases – 'Christ being raised from the dead, *dies no more* – death no more has dominion over Him'. The others had each been raised to a continued earthly existence and would die again. But it wasn't that – in terms of

prolonged life – they were granted only temporary visas whereas the Lord Jesus was granted full resident status. It was far more profound than that. He had conquered death and rose to an altogether different kind of life – to another dimension altogether. When Lazarus was raised, he ‘came out, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin’. He had indeed been raised – but he couldn’t pass through graveclothes, let alone the walls of his rock tomb. Lazarus still had exactly the same kind of body as he had before he died – he needed to come out through the same door he had been carried in – and he would die again. But when Jesus rose, He passed right through both his graveclothes and the walls of His rock tomb – bursting out into another dimension altogether – He is the mighty Conqueror, alive ‘for evermore’ and possessing ‘the keys of both death and hades’, Rev. 1.18.

VERSES 21-22 teach that it is in every way fitting that resurrection should come through the agency – the channel of man – because death had. Just as Adam brought death – including physical death – not only on himself but on his whole family and line – on all those associated with him as their head – so Christ not only rose Himself but is the means of bringing ‘life’ – including physical life – namely, resurrection – to all His line – to all those who by faith are linked and associated with Him.

VERSE 23. But each in his own ‘order’ – a military metaphor - picturing the arrangement of a regiment of troops into its various ranks. That is, if you like, ‘each in own rank’ – Christ the firstfruits, then those who are ‘of Christ’ – those who belong to Him. And this when He ‘comes’ – that is, when He arrives and is personally present with them – the word used of the ‘coming of Paul’s three friends in chapter 16 verse 17.

VERSE 24. ‘Then’ – the word meaning ‘subsequently’ – ‘after’ but not necessarily ‘straight after’. ‘The end’ – the climax, the consummation – for here we reach the very border of eternity. And now the Lord Jesus delivers the kingdom to God the Father – but only, it is desperately important we note, but only *after* He has ‘destroyed’ all rule, authority, power – after He has rendered them all powerless and inoperative – put them out of commission and immobilised them.¹¹ In verses 24-28, Paul places tremendous emphasis on the word ‘*all*’ – using it no less than nine times in these five verses. His point is very simple – in accordance with Psalm 8. 6, God’s ultimate purpose and programme is that ‘*all*’ things are to be subjected beneath Christ’s feet – beneath the feet of the Son of Man, **verse 27.** The only One *not* to be subjected to the Son of Man is God Himself, **verse 28.** *All* of Christ’s enemies – all who oppose, resist – every one of them are to be destroyed – to be annulled – to be put beneath His feet, **verse 25.**

But one of His principal and foremost enemies is *death*. Indeed death will hold out to the last scene and episode of all – death will be the very last enemy to be destroyed, **verse 26.** Yes, but destroyed it *will* be! Death, Paul insists here, isn’t going to have the last word. Nor will it.

Revelation 20 reveals how, at the very end of time, both Death and Hades surrender up the dead that are in them and are both hurled into the lake of fire, verses 13-14. In that passage, John personifies Death and Hades as two unspeakably cruel tyrants – Death having claimed and held men’s bodies captive – and Hades having claimed and held their souls captive – and he sees these two powerful despots finally defeated and destroyed – long after the Beast and false prophet – and even after the devil himself, verse 10. John had made it clear back in chapter 1 of the Revelation that our Lord Jesus already holds the keys of both death and hades of course, 1.18, but now he tells of how they are finally and eternally destroyed. Then it can be truly said – but only then – ‘there is no more death’. Praise the Lord – we are bound for a deathless city, Rev. 21. 4! No cemeteries or funeral parlours there.

But Death, the last enemy, can *only* be said to be vanquished *if* his terrible grip is broken – if he is compelled to yield up all his victims – to release his hold on all his captives. That is, to put it simply – for death to be defeated – all men must be raised at some point or other. In the immediate run up to ‘the end’ – as recorded in Rev. 20 – it’s unbelievers who are raised to face God and His judgement. The point is that death – the last enemy – *must* be subdued – must be defeated – before it can be said that *all* Christ’s enemies are beneath His feet – and *until that moment* He – the Son – is unable to deliver up the subdued kingdom to God – that God might be all in all. In other words, Paul is saying – and I hope you’ve got it – that God’s ultimate and eternal purpose *cannot* be fulfilled – God cannot be all in all – unless first the dead – all the dead – have been raised! And so verses 20-28 argue conclusively that the dead have to rise!

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is the guarantee that *all His people* must rise and Gods’ grand programme of the ages is the guarantee that ultimately *all men* must rise.

In *verses 12-19* Paul pointed out some of the serious implications of denying the resurrection of Christ. Now in *verses 29-34* he points out the serious implications of denying the resurrection of believers. That is, it not a case now of ‘if *Christ* has not been raised’, verses 14, 17, but of ‘if *the dead* are not raised’, verses 29, 32. And again there are the most *devastating consequences* – (i) for *those who are being baptised*, verse 29, (ii) for *Paul himself* in all his sufferings, verses 30-32a, and (iii) for *the way in which we live* and conduct ourselves, verse 32b.

VERSE 29. According to Acts 18, when Paul was at Corinth ‘many ... believed and were baptised’, verse 18. But why, Paul is asking, if the dead rise not, should folk step forward to swell the ranks of the church. Yes, some of the earlier Christians had died, verse 6, but there were other recruits ready to step forward to enlist and take their place

– to fill the ranks of those gone on. But *to what purpose*, Paul ,wants to know, if death is the end of everything? What is the value in being baptised as a new convert if death has the last word?

VERSES 30-32a. ‘And second, why should *I*, he asks, ‘go to such lengths – and suffer such hardships – in my service for Christ? Why should I expose myself to danger and death every hour?’ When writing to the Romans about this very period in his life, Paul applied to himself the words of the psalmist, ‘For your sake we are killed (we face death, that is) all the day long’.¹² And in his second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks very movingly about, ‘the afflictions we encountered in Asia’ – that is, at Ephesus, from where Paul was now writing – ‘We were excessively burdened, beyond our power, so that we despaired even of life ... we are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake’.¹³

I understand ‘I protest by your rejoicing’ in **verse 31** as meaning – ‘I would never dream of deceiving those of whom I boast before God’. Paul wants them to know that he isn’t exaggerating

I suspect that the reference to fighting with wild beasts in **verse 32** is figurative – just as he later wrote to Timothy about being ‘delivered out of the mouth of the lion’, 2 Tim. 4. 17 – which I take to be a veiled reference to Emperor Nero. I was interested to find that Heraclitus, an earlier Greek writer from Ephesus, had spoken of his fellow-citizens as ‘wild beasts’. More generally, the Greeks used the term ‘wild beasts’ to describe a violent, fierce mob. And it was probably very shortly after dictating these words that two of his friends, Gaius and Aristarchus, were almost pulled to pieces by the mob, Acts 19. 29.¹⁴ No doubt, Paul could see the storm already gathering – and ranked these ‘wild beasts’ among his many opponents – the ‘adversaries’ – to whom he refers in 16. 9. But what, Paul wants to know, did he gain from all this suffering and persecution if he faced it only ‘according to man’, lit – probably meaning if he faced it merely as the average man of his day – with no hope beyond the grave?

VERSE 32b. Finally, if the dead aren’t to be raised, we’ve no real basis for morality – we might as well live entirely for ourselves and for pleasure – we might as well live according to the well-known Epicurean maxim and motto – ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ – words which, as we saw previously, are also found in the Old Testament, being the outcry of the people of Jerusalem during the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians, Isa. 22.13.

VERSES 33-34. ‘Don’t be fooled’ – Paul pleads – ‘bad associations corrupt (ruin) good morals (character)’. ‘Sober up’, he says, ‘as from the stupefying effect of drink – to righteousness’. Have done with sinning. It’s a disgrace, he adds – no doubt with great feeling, that they should countenance having non-Christians – those with no knowledge of God – those who denied any resurrection and who therefore undermined all moral principles – in their fellowship.

This brings us to the section from verse 35 to verse 58. And first we need an overview of the section.

In verse 35 Paul quotes two questions posed by the false teachers. First, ‘How are the dead raised?’ – and second, ‘With what kind of body will they come?’

In *verses 36-44a* Paul answers the **second** question, dealing with the nature of the resurrection body. He *makes his appeal to an analogy from nature*.

In *verses 44b-49* Paul argues that, because of our links with two very different kinds of men – Adam and Christ – we have every reason to expect the resurrection of our bodies. In this case, he *makes his appeal to the teaching of Old Testament scripture*.

In *verses 50-57* Paul answers the **first** question, dealing with the ‘mechanics’ of the resurrection change. Here, he *makes his appeal to a revelation from the Lord* - labelled ‘a mystery’. Paul concludes in *verse 58* with a brief practical application.

As I said earlier, the questions of **verse 35** aren’t genuine questions – they aren’t the serious questions of an honest enquirer. The questions are designed rather to ridicule and belittle faith in the resurrection. The false teachers’ main objection to faith in the resurrection was that the whole idea was ludicrous. ‘With what form do you dream the dead will come?’, they scornfully asked. ‘Come on now – this imagined resurrection body of yours will either be the very same as you have now or it won’t. Now, on the one hand, you can’t seriously believe that you’re going to occupy the same body you have now – with all its frailties and imperfections – for ever. But, on the other hand, if the body you dream raised is *not* going to be the same as the one you have now, it follows that it must be something else – call it a fresh creation if you like – but it will certainly not be resurrection. Either way, the whole notion of a resurrection is absurd – completely off the wall’.

In **verses 36-44a**, Paul shows it simply isn’t true that – for there to be resurrection – the raised body must be identical in detail and in form to that which we have in the present. It is, he argues – and proves – possible to retain *identity of nature* - having the same kind of life - without being *identical in form*. In verses 36-41 he encompasses an amazing range of subjects. Paul culls material from botany, zoology and astronomy – ransacking the plant, animal and heavenly realms for his illustrations. In verses 36-38, he draws attention to two simple principles constantly at work in the natural world around and which indeed underpin the doctrine of the resurrection.

In **VERSE 36**, he draws attention to the sheer folly of denying God the power to raise the dead – when we see Him doing just that very thing – and we see Him doing it regularly. It is, he insists, plain silly to argue that a body can't live again because it has died – when we all know full well that no seed germinates, sprouts and lives in a new body unless it first dies. Every time these men sowed seeds in their gardens, they took for granted the very principle which they here denied – that death isn't the end – it's the beginning. Every gardener knows that a seed sprouts – not *in spite* of the fact it died – but *because* it died.

Just imagine if some bright spark ventured to interrupt a gardener at his work, with the observation, 'I say, my man, but don't you realise you are wasting your time. I mean, what is the point of you sowing that seed? What sort of body do you think that grain of wheat – which you are now dropping into the ground – is going to assume? Frankly, you might as well be sowing grains of sand.' I suspect the gardener would put in call for men in white coats to come and have the poor chap taken off and certified. It is, Paul is saying, foolish in the extreme to deny God the power to raise the dead when we see Him regularly reviving seeds which we know have well and truly died.

In **VERSE 37**, Paul makes the second – and equally simple – point that men don't sow full-bodied plants – they don't sow stalks of wheat or cabbages or what have you. They sow *seed* – a 'naked' grain (lit) – naked, that is, in that it's not yet clothed with the body which it's going to have. In form and appearance that which goes into the ground is very, very different to that which is going to come out. And note in passing that Paul has now deliberately introduced the word 'body' into verse 37 to pave the way for the application he is later to make of his illustration.

VERSE 38. 'But God gives it a body'. Yes, God does it. Paul isn't going to attribute this great change to the impersonal power of nature. He has no intention of giving the honour for this marvellous work to blind, mindless forces. And we note that God '*gives*' – that is, He is doing so in the present – He is constantly at work in the creation around us – as the psalmist said, 'He makes grass grow for the cattle', Psa. 104. 14. And we have it on the authority of one infinitely greater than the psalmist that He clothes the lily of the field with a splendour exceeding even that of Solomon, Matt. 6. 29.

But we note that it is 'as He *determined*' – not 'as He determines'. Paul makes reference here to a single act in the past – namely, to the Lord God's original creatorial decree. God goes on doing it in accordance with His original plan at the creation of the world. It was then that God built in those processes which have remained unchanged to the present day. It was then that God coded each plant and its seed separately and distinctively. It was then that God fed in all the necessary information necessary to ensure that a grain of wheat would produce wheat – and only wheat. And the same with rye, barley or whatever.

Not that I'm suggesting for a moment that Paul was clued up on DNA molecules and structure or the like – but he knew as well as any 21st century scientist that – if you sow a grain of wheat, you will get wheat – and not at cabbage – 'to each its own body', verse 38. In other words, that which comes out of the ground – while *not being the same in form and appearance* as that which went in, verse 37 – is most certainly and invariably *the same in nature and kind*, verse 38. So that, in the natural world, *the raised body is in one sense the same* as the sown seed and *in another sense it isn't the same*. It is possible then, Paul is arguing, for the raised body to retain identity of nature with the sown seed – without being identical in form. 'So', he is to point out in verse 42, 'will it be with the resurrection of the dead'.

But first he makes a short detour - hence **VERSES 39-41**. This digression draws attention to the vast range of bodies in God's creation – and demonstrates that God has had no difficulty in making an immense array of bodies – each perfectly adapted to its proper environment. No – there's no shortage of different kinds of bodies in God's universe. Reverently speaking, God is good at making bodies – everything from a sardine to a first magnitude star. It may be worth noting one small technical point. The word translated 'another' in verse 40 is not the same as translated 'another' in both verse 39 and verse 41. Whenever these two words are distinguished, the word used in verse 40 indicates something *altogether different in kind* – while that used in verses 39 and 41 signifies something *different in degree only*. In other words, 'bodies' fall into two main categories, verse 40 – those which are heavenly and those which are earthly – but within each category, verses 39, 41, we discover a seemingly endless diversity and variety.

The *earthly* examples – man and the animal world – *differ in terms of their 'flesh'* – a fish isn't built like a bird – it boasts no feathers – a cow isn't built like a fish – it boasts no fins. The *heavenly* examples *differ in terms of their radiance and glory*. And each body is ideally suited – perfectly adapted – to its own sphere and environment. There's no possible reason, Paul is arguing, to question the ability of the God who has already formed such a vast array of very different kinds of bodies – all equally fitted for its own environment - to provide the believer with a body suited in every way for heaven and glory.

VERSE 42. Back to the ranch then – to apply the lessons learnt in verses 37-38 – namely – that what comes out of the ground – while not being the same in form and appearance as that which went in – remains very much the same in nature and kind. That in one sense the raised body *is* the same as the sown seed – and in another sense *isn't* the same as the sown seed.

'So will it be with the resurrection of the dead', verses 42-44a. '*It is sown in corruption – doomed to decay, to decompose, to disintegrate – it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour – a disgusting and humiliating thing - it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness – feeble and frail – it is raised in power. It is sown a natural – a 'soulish' body – it is raised a spiritual body*'. On the one hand, 'it' remains 'it' – but, on the other hand, it's gloriously changed and transformed.

Paul deliberately concludes his short series of contrasts with the contrast between the body as 'soulish' and as 'spiritual' – because this opens up the way for him to marshal yet another argument for the resurrection of the believer – namely the links which each believer has with the only two kinds of men there have ever been – or will be – Adam and Jesus, **VERSES 45-49**. By speaking of Jesus as '*the second man*', verse 47, Paul is stressing that there *never has been* another kind of man – all that came between Adam and Jesus were, so to speak, simply reproductions of Adam – Seth was begotten in his likeness and image, Gen. 5. 3. By speaking of Jesus as '*the last Adam*', verse 45, Paul is stressing that there *never will be* another kind of man

We should note that there is a direct connection between verse 45 and verse 44 which it is difficult for an English translation to bring out. The word translated 'natural' in verse 44 means literally '*soulish*' – 'it is sown a soulish body'. And the quote from Gen. 2. 7 in **verse 45** is literally, 'The first man Adam became a living *soul*'. What does Genesis 2 mean? It's important to note that the very same expression 'living soul' is used in Genesis 1 and 2 of the animal kingdom – when you read the expression 'living creature', it is literally 'living souls' – for example, 'whatsoever Adam called each living 'soul', that was name thereof', 2. 19. In other words, man shares the same kind of physical life as the animals. Like it or not, I share exactly the same senses as a cow – Daisy and I both see, hear, smell, feel and taste. Daisy and I both breathe, both eat, both make sounds, both sleep and so on. Like dear Daisy, I have a 'soulish' body adapted in every way for life in the present world.

Because, then, of my links with the first man Adam – because of my natural descent from him – I now have a body which is like his was – 'soulish', verses 44-45. He was 'out of the earth' – 'made of dust' – 'Dusty Adam' if you like – and – because of my links with him – I too now have a body made of dust, **verse 48**. But, *as a Christian*, I also have links with *another* Man – with 'the man of heaven' – with the Risen Lord, **verse 48**. And I can be confident that – because of my links with Him – I shall one day have a body just like His. Just as I now bear the image of the man of dust, I shall one day bear the image of the man of heaven, **verse 49**. Wow!

Both Adam and Christ had or have their own proper realm. Adam belonged to earth – but the Lord Jesus belongs to heaven. Adam had a body suited to the earthly realm – but the Risen Lord now has a body suited to the heavenly realm. In terms of chronology and their appearance in the world – the 'soulish' man – Adam – the man of dust – came first – and then, later, the 'spiritual' – Christ – the man of heaven, **verse 46**. And that sequence is to be the same for us – first – now – we have a 'soulish' body – perfectly suited to the earth – and then, one day, a spiritual body – perfectly suited to heaven.

As Paul told the Philippians – 'Our citizenship is in heaven; from where we look for (we eagerly await) the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body', Phil. 3. 20-21. Do you see the connection? In effect, Paul is saying that a heavenly people must have bodies suited to the heavenly realm – just like the Saviour's own glorious body. Well, doesn't it take your breath away! According to Rom. 8, God has predestined you and me to be conformed to the image of His Son, verse 29. 'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, so we shall bear the image of the man of heaven', **verse 49**. Well did Mr Darby pen the words:

*'And is it so—I shall be like Thy Son?
Is this the grace which He for me has won?
Father of glory (thought beyond all thought!)—
In glory, to His own blest likeness brought!'*

I have sometimes asked myself which is the more thrilling - that once this Man of heaven was made like His brethren, Heb. 2. 17 – or that one day His brethren will be like Him. What an incredibly blessed and privileged people we are!

As we have seen, **verse 35** records *two questions* posed by the false teachers – *first*, 'How are the dead raised up?', and *second*, 'With what body do they come?' We noted that they weren't genuine, serious questions. But Paul has provided us with genuine, serious answers to them! We have considered in **verses 36-49** his answer to the *second question*. Now, in **verses 50-57**, Paul returns to answer *the first question*, 'How are the dead raised up?', and deals with the 'mechanics' of the great resurrection change. He ends the section, **verse 58**, with *the practical implication of believing that this life is not all that there is* – in obvious contrast to the end of the section down to verse 34 which sets out *the practical implication of believing that it is*.

VERSE 50. The opening expression, 'Now this I say', is introduced no doubt for the sake of emphasis.¹⁵ In verse 49, Paul had stated the *certainty* of the great physical change which all Christians are to undergo – 'as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we *shall* also bear the image of the man of heaven'. Note Paul's '*we shall*'. But our section stresses, not so much the *certainty* of the change as the *absolute necessity* for that change – for

both living and the dead believers – note in particular the words ‘cannot’, verse 50, and ‘must’, verse 53. The resurrection isn’t only necessary (a) because it’s an essential part of God’s programme, verses 20-28, (b) because it’s consistent with the pattern set by nature, verses 36-44a, and (c) because it flows inevitably from our links with Adam and Christ, verses 44b-49, but (d) because it is altogether essential if we are to enter heaven physically.

At the outset, Paul impresses on the Corinthians that neither the living nor the dead are physically suited and equipped to enter – that is, inherit - the heavenly realm – the kingdom of God. In chapter 6, Paul had twice warned the Corinthians that the unrighteous ‘*will not* inherit the kingdom of God’ – and had listed the kind of specific sins which exclude men from that kingdom, verses 9-10. Some of the Corinthian Christians had in fact one practised these very sins – but Paul bears them record that they are no longer what they had been then, verse 11. Yet, although they are now accounted righteous – justified – ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ – and are therefore fit for heaven spiritually and morally – they are still not fit for heaven physically – and neither am I.

The expression, ‘flesh and blood’ describes a living person – as in ‘I conferred not with flesh and blood’, Gal. 1. 16 – and in particular the kind of body we occupy here and now. ‘Corruption’ – related to the word ‘corrupt’, verse 33 – describes the state of the bodies of those who have died in Christ. The point is that neither those who will be alive when Jesus comes, nor those who have died in Him, have bodies adapted for the kingdom of God. The apostle John notes that ‘it does not yet appear what we shall be’, 1 John 3. 2 – that is, I don’t possess the faculties now to grasp what my *new* body will be like – but I do know that I must have one if I am to enter heaven physically. This change is not an optional extra in the programme.

VERSE 51. It isn’t necessary that we die – some won’t and – because they are alive when Jesus returns – ill bypass death completely – but it’s absolutely necessary that we be changed. ‘Behold, I tell you a mystery’, Paul says – ‘I tell you something which could never have been discovered by human reason – something which has been hidden in the past – but is now openly disclosed – revealed to the favoured few’. The resurrection of men at the end of human history was no mystery – it was part and parcel of orthodox Jewish belief – as witness the teaching of the Pharisees, and the words of Martha in John 11. 24. But nothing had been revealed previously about the resurrection ‘*out of the dead*’ which Paul has in mind here – still less revealed about the details of what will happen then. By using the word ‘mystery’, Paul alerts us to the fact that he is appealing to a special revelation from the Lord – just as he does when he – in a similar context – he uses the expression, ‘by the word of the Lord’, 1 Thess. 4. 15.

‘We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed’. I once saw this text printed on a birth congratulation card – very appropriately in my – now distant – experience. More seriously, ‘sleep’ is a lovely euphemism for the condition of the body of the Christian following his or her death. For the believer, Jesus has transformed the grim, cold fact of death and burial into a peaceful slumber. Indeed, our very word ‘cemetery’ derives from a Greek word meaning a sleeping place or dormitory. But we shall not *all* sleep. Some time ago, I came across a humorous ditty, ‘There once was a pious young priest – who lived almost wholly on yeast – for he said, It is plain, we must all rise again – so I thought I’d get started at least’. But both priest and ditty are wrong! – it simply isn’t true that ‘we must *all* rise again’ – for the obvious reason that we shall *not* all die. ‘But we shall *all* be changed’ – whether still alive - flesh and blood – or having died – and having experienced corruption.

The opening of **VERSE 52** introduces two very different details of timing : first, *the speed at which* the change will take place, and, second, *the occasion on which* the change will take place. **First**, it will be over ‘in a moment’ - literally ‘in an atom’ – meaning to the ancient world that which couldn’t be cut or divided – long before the age of electrons, protons and quarks. An atom was the shortest measurement of time that could be imagined. Paul underlines the point by adding ‘in the twinkling of an eye’ – an expression equated by the Jews with an atom of time – one of their sayings was ‘a moment is as the twinkling of an eye’. The Greeks used the word translated ‘twinkling’ to describe many things – from the buzzing of a gnat to the twinkling of a star. But ‘the twinkling of an eye’ refers to the jerk of the eye, the casting of a glance, the movement of an eyelid. The change will then be more or less instantaneous. If a man should shut his eyes – like some here today – and then immediately open them again – unlike some here today – he would miss the whole event! Now, is that fast, or what! Paul wants the Corinthians – and us – to know that God won’t find it difficult to raise the dead and to change living believers – it will all be over in a split second. When the time comes, omnipotence will have no problem in effecting the great change.

Second, the change will take place at the blast of the last trumpet. As has often been pointed out, 1 Corinthians 15 is the chapter of last things – towards the beginning of the chapter, we read of the last witness, verse 8; later of the last enemy, verse 26; and the last Adam, verse 45; now we have the last trumpet, verse 52. It may well be that Paul is referring to the well-known Roman war trumpet – he certainly did so in 14. 8 when he spoke of the need for a clear trumpet call if men are to be summoned to battle. I’m no authority on such matters but I understand that the Roman army employed three distinct trumpet calls to get their troops moving. At the first trumpet, the soldiers would dismantle their tents – at the second, they would assemble in proper order – and at the third – the last trumpet – they would move out and march off – ‘forward’. Paul may therefore be saying then that this will be the signal for us all to ‘move out’. In any case, this is unquestionably ‘the trumpet of God’, which is to accompany the Lord’s commanding shout and the archangel’s voice, 1 Thess. 4. 16 – it sounds like being quite a noisy – even deafening event – to me! It seems then that God’s programme for the church down here will be terminated by the

sounding of a last trumpet – much as – according to Revelation 11 – will His programme for Israel, verse 15 – in that case the last of the seven trumpets sounded by the angels of Rev. 8. 1.

We note that here in 1 Cor. 15, Paul makes no mention – as he does in 1 Thess. 4 – of the Lord's coming – of His descending Himself from heaven – or of believers being seized and plucked away, of their being caught up - raptured – 'to meet the Lord in the air'. And what a prospect that is – of meeting the Lord personally! But, wonderful as these themes are – and packed with comfort – especially for those whose loved ones have gone on before – they are in no way relevant to Paul's point here. For here it's not a question of *where* we are going to be – or *with whom* we are going to be – but *what* we are going to be. There must be a change!

But, although Paul doesn't involve us here in the programme of 1 Thess. 4, he adheres strictly to the sequence of events outlined in 1 Thess. 4 – clearly distinguishing the dead believers – who are to be raised incorruptible – from the 'we' – those who will remain alive when the Lord returns – and whose bodies are to be changed – from what Phil. 3 calls their present lowly state to be like the Saviour's own glorious body.

For the dead in Christ will rise 'first', 1 Thess. 4. 16. As Paul was at pains to point out to the Thessalonians, the fact they have died will *not* put them at any disadvantage. Indeed, not only will they share in the benefit of our Lord's return - they will actually be the *first* to benefit. Although – as our verse assures us – everything's going to be over mighty fast. There will indeed be an *order* – a sequence – with the dead raised *before* the living are changed – but there will be no perceptible *interval*! Now, God's longsuffering waits – as it did in the days of Noah – but when His clock strikes things will really move!

And we must be careful not to read too much into Paul's words, 'we shall be changed'. Paul wasn't claiming that he knew that he would be among those who will be alive when the Lord comes. Back in chapter 6, he spoke as if he expected the very opposite – 'God both raised up the Lord, and will also raise us up by His power', verse 14. And he says much the same in his second letter – 'knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up', 4. 14. The truth was that Paul didn't know into which category he would fall. But he did know that, *if he died* before the Lord came, he would be covered by 1 Cor. 6. 14, and, *if he was still alive* when the Lord came, he would be covered by 1 Cor. 15. 52. As far as Paul was concerned, the Lord could have returned at any time – and Paul lived and watched accordingly.

Note that **VERSE 53** opens with 'For'. That is, verse 53 explains the reason for verse 52. Continuing the note struck in verse 50, *both the dead* – 'this corruption' – *and the living* – 'this mortal' – those who haven't died but who are subject and liable to death – *must* be changed – radically, fundamentally changed. This corruption must *put off its rags* of corruptibility, to *be arrayed* in the splendid robes of incorruption – and this mortal must *put off its rags* of mortality, to *be arrayed* in the splendid robes of immortality. Here lies the proper hope of the Christian – not death but the coming of the Lord.

The apostle explains this more fully in 2 Cor. 5. 2-4, 'we groan, earnestly desiring *to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven* – since indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent – remember the time he spent making tents at Corinth! – groan, being burdened, *not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed*, that mortality may be swallowed up by life'. In that very context, Paul spoke of believers who die – who are absent from the body and at home with the Lord – and, yes, most certainly to depart and be with Christ is 'far better' than to stay here as we are, Phil. 1. 23.

But this is something far better still – which is the *very* best of all. For the victory isn't really complete while the great enemy Death retains even one hair of a believer's head. We groan, Paul told the Romans, as we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies, Rom. 8. 23. And when Jesus comes, He isn't going to leave the smallest particle of redeemed dust - for sin, death or Satan to hold up as a trophy of what they had once accomplished. Horatio Spafford expressed it beautifully, 'But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait - the sky, not the grave is our goal' – although continuing rather less accurately 'Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!'

Note that '*this*' corruptible shall put on - clothe itself with - incorruption – returning to the point Paul had made back in verses 42-44 - that, while the body which comes out of the ground is not the same in form and appearance as that which went in, it continues to be in identity the same body. '*It is sown in corruption – it is raised in incorruption*' and so on.

VERSE 54. When this happens, death will be well and truly defeated. As far as those Christians are concerned, whose bodies lie asleep in the grave, death will be *compelled to release* his hold on *all* his victims and spoils. As far as living Christians are concerned, death will be *compelled to yield up* any future claim to their bodies – they will never die physically. With an eye to Isa. 25. 8 – from which very verse John extracted the promise that God will one day wipe away tears from the faces and eyes of His people – Paul exclaims, 'then death is swallowed up – overwhelmed, engulfed, drowned (Heb. 11. 29) – in victory' – 'into victory' lit – so as to result in complete victory. The sentence pronounced in Genesis 3 will then be reversed! And so, having spoken both of the necessity for the great change and the mystery of the great change, Paul now introduces us to the victory *represented by* the great change.

VERSES 55-57. In chapter 13 verse 14 of his prophecy, Hosea sang joyfully about the resurrection of Israel as a nation. Adapting the words of the prophet, Paul personifies the great enemy death and flings down the gauntlet – throws out the double challenge, ‘O death, *where* is your victory? O death, *where* is your sting’, **verse 55**.

As I understand it, the section verses 55-57 refers throughout to that final and ultimate victory which lies in the future – when the Lord comes. The wording of verse 54 seems conclusive – ‘*When*’ the corruptible and mortal have put on incorruption and immortality – ‘*then* shall be brought to pass – *will be* – the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory’ – ‘*when ... then*’. Final victory comes only then.

Quite possibly, **verse 55** follows the same order which Paul has observed throughout verses 52-54 – namely, the dead first and then the living. ‘O death, where is your victory?’ – ‘*Now that you have been robbed of your prey – now that you have been forced to yield up every victim you have ever claimed – now that you have been well and truly spoiled – O death – where is your empty victory now?*’ And ‘O death, where is your sting’ – ‘*Now that you have no power to hurt or injure – now that your sting has been drawn and you are unable to inflict injury on those who still live – O death – where is your fearful sting?*’ The basic meaning of the word here rendered ‘sting’ is ‘anything which pierces’.¹⁶ The idea here is almost certainly that of the venomous sting of a snake, or, as in Rev. 9. 10, of a scorpion. But, sin having been overcome, death is like a snake which has had its poisonous fang removed or a scorpion which has had its tail-sting removed – it is altogether helpless.

In **verse 56** Paul links death to sin – and sin to the law. He does the same in Romans 6 and 7 and, to some extent, verse 56 is a summary of his argument there. Paul argues in Romans 6 that, because of his links with Christ, the believer is *no longer under sin* – and in Romans 7 that, because of his links with Christ, the believer is *no longer under the law*.¹⁷ In dying with Christ, the Christian has been set free from both sin and the law. Free from the law because the law not only condemns *sin* – not only condemns the *sinner* – but, Paul had found, in his own case at least, that indwelling sin took advantage of the law, using it as base of operations – a bridgehead – to attack him. He had found in experience that his sinful nature was stirred up by the law – was roused the more to sin. He had found that that which was holy, just and good in itself served to incite and empower sin. And so, *just as* the sting of death is sin, so the power of sin is the law, verse 56. But at the end of Romans 7 (verses 24-25), having spoken of men’s bondage to both sin and the law, he cries out, ‘Who will deliver – rescue – me from this body of death?’ – for Paul knew that sin, provoked by the law, brings death – and jubilantly bursts out, ‘I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord’. Here also the apostle bursts out with thanks to God – this time because the final victory lies – not with death, sin or the law – nor with all three – but with God – and that through our Lord Jesus Christ – who has both deprived sin of its power and death of its sting, **verse 57**.

God be thanked, Paul said to the Romans, that we *now* enjoy freedom from sin and the law. But God be thanked too, Paul says to the Corinthians, that we will enjoy final and eternal victory over death *when the Lord comes* – for God gives that victory to us – through our Lord Jesus Christ. Small wonder then that just a few words from the end of chapter 16, Paul cannot restrain himself – ‘*Mārenā thā – our Lord, come*’ – he exclaims, 16. 22.

VERSE 58. Note in passing Paul’s fond address, ‘my beloved brethren’ and compare the very last words Paul wrote in his letter, ‘My love be with you all in Christ Jesus’. Notwithstanding the many failings, follies and errors of the Corinthian saints, his affection for them is undiminished.

Paul ends on an intensely practical note. ‘But *if there is* such a thing as resurrection’, he is saying – ‘*if there is* such a thing as life after death – *if there is* such a thing as another world – *if there is* such a thing as a time of review and recompense’ – as he had claimed in chapters 3 and 4 – ‘*then ...*’.

Paul had assured the Corinthians, back in verse 10, that in his case, *God’s grace* had not been in vain because he had laboured – toiled to weariness, verse 10. Now he assures them that *such labour* itself is not in vain – because there is indeed another world for us to live in. And in the light of that world, he says, we should be :

- (i) *Steadfast* – a word derived from that for a seat – to be settled – of fixed purpose in the face of enticements to evil.
- (ii) *Immovable* – so as not to be turned aside or shaken by outward assault.
- (iii) *Always abounding* – excelling, overflowing – in the work of the Lord.

Such labour, Paul insists, isn’t wasted. It is not as if you are going to die, he is saying, and never live again. Your work and labour for the Lord is far from futile. I have been struck – and greatly helped – by a story I came across in Warren Wiersbe’s commentary on 2 Corinthians.¹⁸ Wiersbe tells of a faithful missionary couple who returned to the United States on the same ship that brought the then-President, Mr Roosevelt, home from a safari in Africa. Many reporters and photographers lined the New York dockside, waiting to see the President and interview him and, of course, take lots of pictures. But nobody turned up to welcome the veteran missionaries who had spent their lives serving the Lord in Africa. That evening in a modest hotel room the couple reviewed the events of the day. The husband tended to be somewhat bitter. ‘It isn’t fair’, he complained to his wife. ‘Mr Roosevelt comes home from a hunting trip, and the whole country is out to meet him. We get home after years of service, and nobody is there to greet us.’ His wife had the perfect answer : ‘Honey, we aren’t home yet’. As the writer to the Hebrews said, ‘God is not unjust to forget your work’, Heb. 6. 10.

Chapter 16 provides us with many shining examples of those whose lives provide us with a commentary on Paul's exhortation.

First, there is **Paul** himself, verses 5-9. Paul spoke in detail of his change of plans – mainly his deferring of the visit he had originally planned to make to them because of his reluctance to come and read the riot act to them. Instead therefore of paying them a passing visit on the way to Macedonia, he now planned to visit Macedonia first – but only briefly – and then to stay - abide, remain - some time with them, verse 7. His journey through Macedonia would allow time for his letter hopefully to produce its desired effect. We know that, in the event, he spent three months in Greece following his journey through Macedonia – no doubt mainly in Corinth, Acts 20. 2-3.

The reference to 'tarrying' with them, verse 7, leads him to make known his present intention of 'tarrying' a while in Ephesus, verse 8. Paul explains his two-fold reason for remaining at Ephesus. First, he had found there a great and effective door opened to him – a wide field of usefulness opened not by him, but to him – by Him who has the key of David, that opens, and no man shuts. There were abundant opportunities of usefulness which presented themselves. But, second, there were the adversaries. There were, we have learned, many wild beasts for him to fight – for example, the mob at Ephesus which was bitterly antagonistic to the faith. For most of us the existence of fierce opposition would have been reason enough to have packed our bags and beat a hasty retreat – but not to Paul. This worker, this labourer, was undeterred by the opposition – he was steadfast and immovable.

Second, there is **Timothy**, verses 10-11. The apostle had earlier sent him from Ephesus to Corinth, 4. 17. Luke tells us in Acts 19 that Paul 'sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus - but he himself stayed in Asia for a time', verse 22. Timothy was, therefore, at this moment, travelling through Macedonia, on course for Corinth. The bearers of Paul's letter had no doubt gone by sea direct from Ephesus to Corinth and had reached there before Timothy. Timothy had been sent to remind them of Paul's ways, as he taught in all churches, 4. 17 – not an entirely welcome message. And Timothy was a young man – even eight years later, Paul still speaks of Tim as young. Paul was concerned that Timothy would be intimidated and 'despised' by some at Corinth. He gave as his reason for requiring Timothy's acceptance – 'he does – works, lit) the work of the Lord as I also do'. Now that is some commendation indeed. Here then is another who abounded 'in the work of the Lord', 15. 58.

Third, there is **Apollos**, verse 12. 'Now concerning' – probably the last of six references in this letter to items raised in the letter which Paul had received from them.¹⁹ It seems that the assembly wanted Apollos to visit them again – and had asked Paul to nudge Apollos in their direction. Paul made it clear that, as requested, he had done everything he could to encourage Apollos to come to them. Luke paints a small pen portrait of Apollos before Apollos had first gone to Corinth. Apollos was, Luke says, 'eloquent in speech, powerful in the scriptures and fervent – boiling hot – in spirit', Acts 18. 24-25. And, when, at the beginning, Apollos had wished to leave Ephesus for Achaia - that is, Corinth -, the brethren at Ephesus wrote asking that he be received – and when he came he had been a great help to the Corinthians, Acts 18. 27 – he had contributed much to them. Paul bore him witness that he had 'laboured'²⁰ at Corinth – 'watering' the church which Paul had planted there, 1 Cor. 3. 6. It wasn't Apollos's 'will' to come back to them now – but, Paul assured them, he would come when he had opportunity. Clearly he was just too busy at the time. Apollos was no sluggard!

Then there was **the household of Stephanas**, verses 15-16 – these were among the first converts in Achaia – the firstfruits - and among the very few who Paul had baptised personally at Corinth, 1. 16. They had since devoted themselves to the service of the saints – with all that that involved – and are bracketed by Paul, verse 17, with all who worked and laboured with him – using the very words of 15. 58.

Then there were **Stephanas, Fortunatas and Achaicus**, verses 17-18. These were members of the church in Corinth, who visited Paul at Ephesus – quite possibly the bearers of the letter which the Corinthians had written to Paul. The lack of the fellowship and presence of the Corinthian church itself was supplied – was compensated for - by that of their three representatives. They refreshed, revived, 'rested'²¹ Paul's spirit. And he certainly needed it, verse 9. But what a wonderful ministry. What a lovely – and most valuable – work. Interestingly, Clement, an elder in one of the churches of Rome, wrote to Corinth about AD 95 and requested that 'Fortunatus' come to Rome with others to report on the Corinthians' response to his (Clement's) letter – in which he had pleaded for unity and peace. This was about 40 years after Paul wrote – so, if it was the same brother, he must have been quite young at this time.

And finally, there were **Aquila and Priscilla**, verse 19. This great couple are always mentioned together in the New Testament. Paul and they had much in common. They shared the same nationality, trade, faith and service. Paul had first met them at Corinth - following an edict of Emperor Claudius, expelling all Jews from Rome on account of Jewish riots there – which probably resulted from the introduction of the gospel into the Jewish community there. The time spent by Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth no doubt explains why their greetings here are said to be particularly warm - 'greet you much', lit. Paul and they had worked together as tentmakers at Corinth. At some time they had risked their very lives for him, Rom. 16. 3 – they had, metaphorically speaking 'placed their neck' on the executioner's block under the axe or word. More than likely this happened while Paul was at Ephesus, where, as we have seen he had an exceedingly rough time – 'burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that

we despaired even of life' as he put it, 2 Cor 1. 8. Paul described them well – when he called them his fellow-workers, Rom. 16. 3 – using again the same word as in 1 Cor. 15. 58.

Let us take then such folk as our models and examples and determine, whatever the discouragements of the way, to 'be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labour is not in vain in the Lord', 1 Cor. 15. 58.

Footnotes

¹ It is for this reason that Jesus could silence the Sadducees in Matthew 22.23-34 simply by referring them to the words of Exod. 3.6 – which has nothing to say directly about resurrection. It was enough that God's word to Moses made it clear that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still *alive*. This proved that the basis of the Sadducees' argument was defective. Their fundamental objection to the doctrine of resurrection was that men and women cease to exist when they die. By proving, from one of the books of Moses (which the Sadducees accepted as inspired – unlike most other Old Testament books) that there is life after death, Jesus had pulled the rug right out from under their feet.

² M.R.Vincent's Word Studies, vol III, page 278, and T. Teignmouth Shore's remarks on 1 Corinthians 15.32 in Ellicott's Bible Commentary.

³ The theatre which features in Acts 19.29-41.

⁴ 'Archaeology and the Bible' by D J Wiseman and E Yamauchi, page 94.

⁵ Mark and Luke both say that Jesus 'expired', Mark 15.37; Luke 23.46. Matthew says that He 'released His spirit', Matt. 27.50, and John that He 'delivered up His spirit', John 19.30.

⁶ 'Death' in Rom. 5.10; 6.5; 1 Cor. 11.26; Phil. 2.8 (twice); 3.10; and Col. 1.22. 'Died' in Rom. 5.6, 8; 6.10 (twice); 8.34; 14.9, 15; 1 Cor. 8.11; 15.3; 2 Cor. 5.14, 15 (twice); 1Thess. 4.14; 5.10.

⁷ 1 Cor. 15.4, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20.

⁸ The six occurrences are Acts 22.4; 26.11; 1 Cor. 15.9; Gal. 1.13; Phil.3.6; and 1 Tim. 1.13.

⁹ In 1 Cor. 3.19, Paul quotes the words of Eliphaz, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness', from Job 5.13.

¹⁰ Matt. 12.38-40; John 2.18-19; cf. Rom. 1.4.

¹¹ 'Render inactive ... reduce to inactivity', 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', W. E. Vine, article 'Abolish'. Compare the use of the word in Eph. 2.15; 2 Tim. 1.10; Heb. 2.14.

¹² Romans 8.32 – quoted from Psa. 44.22.

¹³ 2 Cor. 1.8-9; 4.11.

¹⁴ Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, 1 Cor. 16.8. His stay there lasted about three years, Acts 20.34. The incident of Acts 19.29 took place immediately before Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia, Acts 20.1, and therefore after Paul wrote.

¹⁵ Compare its use in 1 Cor. 7.29.

¹⁶ It denotes a goad in Acts 26.14.

¹⁷ See also the expression 'not being myself under the law' in the older manuscripts of 1 Cor. 9.20.

¹⁸ Page 126 of 'Be Encouraged', Scripture Press.

¹⁹ But see footnote 2 to chapter 8.

²⁰ Paul uses the same word in 1 Cor. 3.8 of himself and Apollos as he does in 15.58.

²¹ The word of Matt. 11.28.