

‘CHRIST DIED AND ROSE AGAIN’

1 CORINTHIANS 15 – an Introduction and Exposition of verses 1-5.

INTRODUCTION

The background

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

Verses 12, 34 and 35 help us to understand a little of the background to Paul’s arguments. Note the references to ‘*some*’ in verses 12 and 34, and to ‘*someone*’ in verse 35. The questions posed in verse 35 were clearly not genuine questions or enquiries. As we shall see below, these questions express the principal objection of certain false teachers at Corinth to the doctrine of resurrection; namely that the whole idea of resurrection was patently absurd. ‘Go on then’, they were saying, ‘if you insist on there being a “resurrection”, explain to us the mechanics of dead folk being raised; and with what sort of body do you dream they will come?’ The questions were a crude attempt to decry and belittle the Christian’s faith in resurrection. Hence Paul’s sharp retort, ‘Foolish one’, v. 36. Paul was in no mood to mince words because he was confronting, not a 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 does not fill in any details about who the ‘some’ were. He did not need to; the Corinthians knew well enough. But we need to give some thought to who they were.

We note that the statement ‘If the dead do not rise, “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”’, v. 32, only makes sense if the false teachers denied any kind of life after death. It is clear, that is, that the false teachers denied the truth of resurrection for much the same reason as did the Jewish sect of the Sadducees; namely, that men and women cease to exist altogether when they die – that there is nothing at all beyond what Paul calls ‘this life’, v. 19. ... 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.¹

The words ‘let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die’, v. 32, were not only reminiscent of the burden of Isaiah the prophet, Isa. 22. 13, but they also represented a well-known Epicurean maxim which summed up much of its philosophy. And Saul of Tarsus would have been more familiar with this philosophy than most. The *traditional* founder of Tarsus was a character named Sardanapalus. It so happened that the neighbouring town of Anchiale boasted a large statue of Sardanapalus, sitting and snapping his fingers contemptuously. The inscription on the pedestal of the statue read, ‘Sardanapalus . . . built Anchiale and Tarsus in one day . . . eat, drink, be merry; everything else is not worth that [the snapping of the fingers].’² Paul would certainly have known of Sardanapalus, if not seen the actual statue.

Separately, Paul seemingly quoted a saying of the Greek writer Menander, ‘Evil company corrupts good habits (possibly, good character or good morals)’, v. 33.³ Menander wrote a series of comedies and plays about 300 BC, and his works were still very popular in Paul’s day. We know that Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was written from Ephesus.⁴ Interestingly, archaeologists, when excavating in the vicinity of the theatre of Ephesus in 1967, unearthed a house decorated throughout with theatrical scenes from Menander’s comedies.⁵ We gather, therefore, that Menander was well known, and well liked, in the city from which Paul sent his epistle. And Menander was a well-known Epicurean. Epicurean philosophy was, therefore, still very much in vogue when Paul wrote.

It seems likely that the ‘some’ about whom Paul wrote were, to say the least, tinged with Epicurean teaching.⁶ They had no real knowledge of God, and yet, to the Corinthians’ shame, they were tolerated in the church, v. 34. They were not true Christians at all, and yet, Paul had to say, the ‘some’ were ‘among you’, v. 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.

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*, v. 32; namely, to live a life of self-indulgence. In effect, ‘if I am to die as the beast, I can see no convincing reason that I should not 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*, v. 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.

An outline of verses 1-34

The first half of the chapter comprises two main sections: namely verses 1-19 and verses 20-34. Both sections consist: (i) of a block of teaching, vv. 1-11 and vv. 20-28; followed by: (ii) the implications of denying that particular teaching, vv. 12-19 and vv. 29-34.⁷

In **verses 1-11**, Paul asserts that the resurrection of **Christ** forms **an essential and integral part of the apostolic gospel**. This section looks *backward*, transporting us into the realm of *history*.

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*', vv. 14, 17 lit.

In **verses 20-28**, Paul asserts that the resurrection of **the believer and of all men forms an essential and integral part of God's programme for the future**. This section looks *forward*, projecting us into the realm of *prophecy*.

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*', vv. 29, 32 lit.

EXPOSITION

The resurrection of Christ forms an essential and integral part of the apostolic gospel.

Verses 1-2. Paul begins by asserting that the resurrection of Christ lies at the very heart of the gospel, that it is of fundamental importance, and then offers eyewitness evidence for its historical reality. 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*, vv. 13, 16. For it follows logically that, if there is no such thing as resurrection, then *nobody* has ever been raised – and that includes the Lord 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*', v. 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*', v. 11 (namely, that message which he and others were still preaching). Paul is at pains to emphasize the point that the resurrection of Christ is inescapably part and parcel of the apostolic gospel *in which they stood and by which they were being saved*. They had '*received*' it from Paul, v. 1, just as *he* in turn had '*received*' it, v. 3, presumably from the Lord Himself.⁸

Verses 3-5. He had 'delivered' to them four key statements as of '*first*' (i.e., of primary) importance, four simple propositions which stood at the very forefront of his message. 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 (i) the addition of explanatory details ('for our sins' and 'the third day') and (ii) the claim to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy ('according to the Scriptures'). It was said of the house of Dagon at Gaza that there were 'two middle pillars which supported the temple', Judg. 16. 29. So too, metaphorically speaking, the gospel stands on two great central pillars; namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus. We can compare Paul's summaries elsewhere; 'to this end Christ died and lived again',⁹ and 'if we believe that Jesus died and rose again'.¹⁰

The *second* and *fourth* statements (that He 'was buried' and 'was seen') function as supporting evidence for the first and third statements. They both tell us what men did. (i) *Christ died*, and one of the ways we know that He died is that *men buried Him*. (ii) *He rose again*, and one of the ways we know that He rose again is that *men saw Him*. He 'died for our sins', v. 3, that *we* might not remain in them; if He had not died and risen, we would be 'still in' our 'sins', v. 17, and, even worse, as was the case with the Jews to whom Jesus once spoke, we would die in them, John 8. 24.

Verse 4. 'He rose again' is literally 'He *has been raised*'. The tense Paul used in describing Jesus' resurrection differs radically from that which he used in the other three propositions. In each of the other three cases, the tense¹¹ refers to a single act, to a 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 (being the Aramaic for Peter).¹² But, by way of contrast, the tense Paul used to describe Jesus' resurrection indicates that, in this case, although the action was completed in the past, it has a

continuing effect – that the result remains until the present.¹³ In a word, that He is the living Lord! And Paul underlines this particular point by using the same tense seven times in the immediate context.¹⁴

Our Lord was raised again, Paul says, ‘the third day according to the Scriptures’. Some may wonder to which Old Testament passages the apostle refers. The comments of Beale and Carson are helpful: ‘The reference to “the third day” . . . may bring to mind Hos. 6. 2; Jonah 1. 17. However, the phrase “according to the Scriptures” modifies “was raised” rather than [“the third day”] (cf. similar syntax in 1 Macc. 7. 16)’.¹⁵

Verses 5-8. The main point which Paul wants to press home on the Corinthians is that, as far as the gospel is concerned, the resurrection of Jesus is far from some minor detail or unimportant ingredient. It ranks ‘of first importance’, being one of the two events which form 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, v. 4, but to that of the New Testament apostles and others, vv. 5-8.

Paul chooses his witnesses carefully. He cites 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),¹⁶ through ‘all the apostles’, to himself.

Verse 6. Note Paul’s mention of ‘over five hundred brethren at once’, and remember that the apostle was writing no more than twenty-five years after the reported event. And most of these ‘brethren’, he points out, were still alive, and were therefore still available as witnesses. Paul was not afraid that someone might call his bluff. If called on, he could produce the witnesses. Paul’s expression ‘at once’ (‘at one time’, lit.) rules out any question of hallucination. And twenty-five years certainly did not allow sufficient time for some myth or legend to have evolved. ‘Some have fallen asleep’ is a lovely euphemism to describe the bodily condition of dead Christians, conveying not only the ideas of rest and peace but the promise that, in due course, the body will wake again.¹⁷

Verse 8. ‘*Last of all He was seen by me*’ (italics mine) tells us that the appearances of the risen Lord ceased as abruptly as they had commenced,¹⁸ a further argument against any theory of hallucinations. Paul’s encounter with Jesus was distinguished from the experience of the others he cited because he had seen Jesus *after He had gone back to heaven*; cf. Acts 22. 14; 1 Cor. 9. 1. Paul knew full well that his life had not been so radically changed by an encounter with a dead religious leader!

Paul’s mention of his own conversion 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 abuse¹⁹ hurled at Paul by his foes at Corinth. I have read that the Roman historian Suetonius reported how, in the days of Emperor Augustus, the people gave the label ‘abortives’ to some Roman senators who were unworthy of office and who had been elected only as a result of bribery and string-pulling.²⁰ It was, that is, a term of contempt for someone known to be unworthy of high office. 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 *was not worthy* to be called an apostle, he knew that he *was called* to be one.²¹

Verse 9. Paul does not disclaim his fitness to be classed with the other apostles because he was in any way inferior to them in office or message, nor because he fell behind them in terms of service or sufferings for Christ. Far from it! For he, the last apostolic recruit, excelled the others in active service and suffering, v. 10. His unworthiness stemmed only from what he had been before he became a Christian, v. 9. For, in one sense, Paul was unable to erase his past. He could never forget the role he had once played as arch-persecutor of the early church.²² This memory stayed with him throughout his whole Christian life.²³

Verse 10. ‘But by the grace of God’, he continues. ‘Yes’, Paul is saying, ‘it is the very God whose church I persecuted who bestowed His grace on me’. And the apostle stood in no doubt about what that church had cost God – nothing less than the blood of His own Son!²⁴ What truly amazing grace.

Paul is careful to attribute everything²⁵ to God’s undeserved favour shown to him, drawing attention to that grace no less than three times in one verse.²⁶ ‘Thankfully’, Paul could have said, ‘*I am not what I have been*’, v. 9. ‘Regrettably’, he might have said, ‘*I am not what I am going to be*’, v. 51. But it was sufficient for his present purpose for him to be able to say, ‘Truthfully, by the grace of God *I am what I am*’.

Reproduced, with permission, from 'Studies in First Corinthians' (Precious Seed Publications (2016)); available from <https://www.preciousseed.org/onlineshop-preciousseed/commentaries/44-studies-in-first-corinthians>.

Notes

¹ Acts 17. 18; 18. 1.

² One ancient source is STRABO, *Geography*, 14. 5. 9 (accessible at ... <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0239%3Abook%3D14%3Achapter%3D5%3Asection%3D9>). See also M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, and T. Teignmouth Shore, *Ellicott's Bible Commentary*. [Also A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*.]

³ MENANDER, *Thais*, 'Communion with the bad corrupts good character'. See F. G. ALLINSON, *Menander: The Principal Fragments*, pg. 357. Accessible at <https://ryanfb.github.io/loebolus-data/L132.pdf>. MENANDER lived 342-290 BC. But note the claim of SOCRATES of CONSTANTINOPLE that 'this sentence, 'Evil communications corrupt good manners' is a sufficient proof that he [Paul] was conversant with the tragedies of Euripides [480-406 BC)]', SOCRATES of CONSTANTINOPLE, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Chapter 16 (accessible at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26013.htm>).

⁴ 1 Cor. 16. 8.

⁵ See D. J. WISEMAN and E. YAMAUCHI, *Archaeology and the Bible*, pg. 94.

⁶ Although it is possible that there was more to their wrong ideas than that. GORDON FEE suggests that, 'In their view, by the reception of the Spirit, and especially the gift of tongues, they thought that they had already entered the true spirituality that is to be (4. 8); already they had begun a form of angelic existence (13. 1; cf. 4. 9; 7. 1-7) in which the body was unnecessary and unwanted, and would finally be destroyed', GORDON D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pg. 715.

⁷ Compare the comment of THISELTON, 'Paul draws upon those standard forms of classical rhetoric that clarify argument and articulate truth . . . The declaration of the common apostolic tradition begins a statement of what is the case (the *narratio*, 15. 1-11). The consequences of denying the resurrection constitute a first *refutatio* (vv. 12-19), involving deliberative rhetoric. This outlines advantages of the case . . . The next section affirms positive declarations and constitutes a rhetorical *confirmatio* (vv.20-34)', ANTHONY C. THISELTON, *The significance of recent research on 1 Corinthians for hermeneutical appropriation of this epistle today*, *Neotestamentica* 40.2 (2006), pg. 334.

⁸ Compare Paul's claims elsewhere; 'I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you', 1 Cor. 11. 23, and '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.

⁹ Rom. 14. 9 (lit.).

¹⁰ 1 Thess. 4. 14.

¹¹ Aorist.

¹² In linking together our Lord's death, burial and His resurrection, 'Paul emphasizes the reality of Christ's death and thus the bodily nature of his resurrection. Christ's resurrection was not to be viewed as some bodiless "spiritual" renewal of life after death', STEPHEN J. WELLUM, *Christ's Resurrection and Ours (1 Corinthians 15)*, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 6/3 (Fall 2002), pg. 79.

¹³ 'This perfect tense marks a change from the aorist or point tense in the preceding sentences simply stating past facts, and lays stress on the continuous results and efficacy of Christ's Resurrection; as the Risen One He remains alive', W. E. VINE, *1 Corinthians*, note on verse 4.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 15. 4, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20.

¹⁵ G. K. BEALE and D. A. CARSON, *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, pg. 744.

¹⁶ 'The appearance to Cephas is listed first because he was the leading apostle among the Twelve, who come next on the list', ROBERT H. GUNDRY, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation*, pg. 680.

¹⁷ “But some have fallen asleep” makes explicit the implication in [“the greater part remain to the present”], but also prepares for a discussion of all deceased believers’ resurrection as an awakening out of the sleep of death’, GUNDRY, *ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘The words “last of all” in verse 8, when viewed in their relation to the several times repeated “then” of the previous verses, seem distinctly to imply that the manifestation spoken of was not only the last of the particular series to which allusion had been made, and which might therefore have been afterwards renewed, but that it was the final appearance of the Risen Lord in the form and way then in question’, WILLIAM MILLIGAN, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ Cf. Ps. 58. 8.

²⁰ JOHN GILL, *Exposition of the Whole Bible*, note on 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 8. For his source, GILL refers to SUETONIUS, *Life of Augustus*, chapter 35.

²¹ 1 Cor. 1. 1.

²² ‘The church of God he mentions [in verse 9] was the local church in Jerusalem. When that was scattered under his persecution other churches had not been formed. The phrase is not anywhere used of the entire Church, the Body of Christ’, VINE, *ibid.*, note on verse 9.

²³ Acts 22. 4; 26. 11; Gal. 1. 13; Phil.3. 6; 1 Tim. 1. 13.

²⁴ Cf. ‘purchased with the blood of His own’, Acts 20. 28 (J.N.D).

²⁵ ‘Grace had sniffed the competition and broken the tape’, ROY A HARRISVILLE, *Augsberg Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, pg. 258.

²⁶ A homely illustration which attempts to capture the paradox in Paul's words about his own abundant labour and the work of God's grace is quoted by ROBERTSON and PLUMMER: ‘from a human point of view [it] is as the joy of a child who gives his father a birthday present out of his father's own money’, A. ROBERTSON and A. PLUMMER, *International Critical Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, pg. 342.