

## Paul & the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15.1-11

*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

At the heart of the New Testament kerygma, whether in the gospels or in the epistles, is the passion of Christ and his resurrection from the dead. That the cross and the resurrection are both seen as essential components in the salvific message is evident from the emphasis that Jesus gives to these events prior to his final entry into Jerusalem. Last week we focused on Jesus' declaration that *even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10.45). The first announcement of his *raison d'être* for the incarnation comes in Mark 8.31 subsequent to the pivotal point in Jesus' public ministry (the confession of Peter at Caesarea-Philippi that Jesus is the Christ) Jesus foretells his death and resurrection two more times before his entry into Jerusalem (Mark 9.31; 10.32). With each pronouncement of his being condemned to death by the chief priests and scribes and being delivered to the Gentiles for execution there is an assurance that he will rise from the death three days later. So, just as we see that the vicarious atonement for sin on the cross is central to the gospel message of the early church (Acts 2.24; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.39-40; 13.30, 34); likewise, we see the resurrection is a central doctrine for Christianity (Acts 2.32; 3.26; 4.2, 33; 13.37; 17.18, 32; 23.6; 24.15, 21; 26.8; cf. 1.22).

As in the gospels, so, too, in Paul's letters we find that his testimony to the resurrection of the Christ is central. Indeed, Paul writes: *But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins* (1 Corinthians 15.13-14, 17). The New Testament scholar Gordon Fee writes: "To deny the objective reality of Christ's resurrection is to have a faith considerably different from Paul's. One wonders whether such faith is still the *Christian faith*" (G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 737; his italics). In truth the *objective reality of Christ's resurrection* is an essential component of the gospel message; without it there can be no New Testament Christological doctrine of salvation.

Among those who embrace an orthodox Christian faith there is an unquestioned acceptance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Within the larger religious communities, quasi-Christian and otherwise, there is a broad spectrum of views regarding the "historical Jesus" and his resurrection (e.g. Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*). The core of Paul's preaching (kerygma)

which included the cross and the resurrection was conducted in a culture that was skeptical of the objective reality of the resurrection. It was for this reason that Paul confronts the Corinthians with the question: *Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?* (1 Corinthians 15.12). The early church, like many in the church today, embraced a radical form of Platonic Greek dualism. Like the Docetists that the apostle John confronts in his first epistle and the Gnostics that would follow in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, there was a prevailing belief that the material world (of which the body is a part) is inferior to that of the “spirit” (non-material). So, the question being posed by some is: “How can the ‘spirit’ be liberated from the body.”

The practical consequences of such views apparently led some of Paul’s less-than-consistent readers in one of two directions, both of which are evident in 1 Corinthians. On the one hand, some took the implications of the body-spirit dichotomy (division) in the direction of *asceticism* (extreme self-denial). This view lurks behind Paul’s need to correct the Corinthians’ views of marriage, particularly evident in their slogan, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (see 7:1b). Still others took the implications of the body-spirit dichotomy (division) in the direction of *libertinism* (extreme self-indulgence). This view lurks behind Paul’s need to correct the Corinthians with regard to their toleration of incest (chap. 5), their moral looseness evident in 6:12-20, and is further epitomized in their slogan, “Everything is permissible for me” (see 6:12; cf. 10:23), a slogan that Paul refutes. Given such a cultural mindset, is it at all surprising that some of Paul’s readers would have been suspicious of affirming a *bodily* resurrection? (Dr. James Sweeney)

The epistemological problem facing the Corinthians, that is, how can they know the truth about the resurrection, is a question facing our own culture. A radical form of Greek dualism was a commonly held worldview among secularized members of the church. While today’s Christian does not confront individuals that believe the universe consists of two, and only two, realities; he or she does have to deal with a postmodern worldview that is deeply suspicious of metanarrative – a story that expresses one’s worldview. The Christian worldview centers on God’s self-disclosure and a divinely revealed account of his salvation history. Paul’s testimony of the resurrection event is based on personal experience, divine revelation (Acts 9.1-15; 26.12-18; Galatians 1.15-16) and the testimony of living witnesses of the event.

The first Corinthian letter is framed by two informative events. First, Paul had received word from Chloe’s people (1 Corinthians 1.11) there had been quarreling among members of the fellowship and that there were issues of gross immorality within the church. Second, Paul had received a letter from the church about issues within the church. The letter was probably brought to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16.17. The issues reported by Chloe’s people are addressed in the first 6 chapters and the remainder of the letter is devoted to answering the concerns addressed in their letter to the apostle. Chapter 15 concludes the second section of his letter with a reminder of the gospel that he preached to them.

Chapter 15 may be broadly divided into four parts:

1. 1 Corinthians 15.1-11 – Paul stresses that the resurrection of Jesus is central to all Christian apostolic preaching and is the basis of his argument for the reality of the believer’s future resurrection.
2. 1 Corinthians 15.12-34 – Paul expands on the implication of Jesus’ resurrection; Jesus’ resurrection and the believer’s future resurrection stand or fall together.
3. 1 Corinthians 15.35-49 – Two questions are answered: “*How are the dead raised?*” (the power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that will raise the believer from the dead) and, “*With what kind of body do they come?*” (a heavenly imperishable body in the image of the man of heaven).
4. 1 Corinthians 15.50-58 – Commentary on Hosea 13.14: the mystery of the resurrection.

### **The Resurrection of Christ**

The foremost point for Paul is that the Corinthian believers remember the gospel that Paul preached to them. This is the foundation upon which their faith was established and built. Hanging on to the basic tenants of the faith is essential if they are to be counted among the believing community. You were saved and you are being saved by your faith in these truths. Paul adds the caveat *unless you believed in vain*. Now, Paul reminds them of precisely what he told them; namely, *that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me*. All of this is to say that at the heart of the New Testament kerygma (gospel preaching) is both the death and resurrection of Christ. Clearly some members of the Corinthian church think of Christ’s resurrection as something other than a physical body. It is for this reason that Paul places great stress on the numerous eyewitnesses to corporeal bodily post-resurrection appearance to them. Though some have died most are still alive at the time of Paul’s correspondence and Paul himself bore witness to having seen the resurrected Lord.

It was Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ that is the center of his proclamation of the gospel: *but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain*. Paul recalls his zeal in the persecution of the church (cf. Galatians 1.13-14; Philippians 3.6; Romans 10.2-3), but he was transformed by the work of God’s grace (cf. Romans 1.1-5; Ephesians 3.7; 2 Timothy 1.8-12). The bottom line is this no matter who delivered the message it is the gospel that is *the power of God for salvation* (Romans 1.16).

Paul drives home his point of the centrality of the resurrection with this argument: *Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because*

*we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Paul cautions the Corinthians not to be swayed by the prevailing philosophy of Greek dualism and so, too, we ought to be leery of the postmodernist's vogueish embracing of philosophical naturalism (Colossians 2.6-8). The Christian's worldview is grounded on the truth of revelation; the testimony of the prophets and the apostles.

### **A Long Afterword Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 15.22**

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15.22, *for as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*. In one brief sentence he captures the beginning and end of salvation history. Life as Adam and Eve experienced it before the Fall was free of the ravages of sin – it was, in short, perfect! The progenitors of our race enjoyed an unhindered fellowship with God. However, this ideal relationship was short lived. As sin was introduced into the world, it brought with it the curse of spiritual and physical death. Death has been euphemistically described by secularists as a friend to the suffering; it is merely the closing chapter of life. But the Bible does not describe it as an ally; death has never been a friend to man. It is the enemy of hope, an untimely interloper, a destroyer of dreams, a thief who steals the future. Death is not the end God intended for mankind. To the contrary, he created mankind to enjoy a never-ending fellowship with himself. For what other reason would he put the tree of life in the garden. The hearts of men are restless until they find their rest in the Lord. God put a hunger for eternity in the hearts of men (Ecclesiastes 3.11). If the sin of Adam and Eve had been the *coup de grace* for mankind, then God would have destroyed the race of man immediately. It is apparent within the pages of Scripture that God had a plan sovereignly to overrule the effects of Adam's sin.

So, the great fall of man was not an end to history but the beginning of salvation history. As one progresses through the pages of Scripture, it becomes increasingly clear that God's purposes in redemption cannot be thwarted by the sin of Adam. Indeed, the biblical narrative from Genesis 3 to Revelation 21 is an account of how God purposed to restore mankind into fellowship with himself. Willem Van Gemeren outlines the progress of redemption in biblical history into twelve periods.

#### **Creation in Harmony      Gen 1-2**

Yahweh is creator and Lord of all: humans are vice regents; there is a covenant with creation.

#### **Creation in Alienation      Gen 3-11**

Rebellion against God's Kingship; establishment of two kingdoms, God and man; the Noahic covenant.

#### **Election and promise      Gen 12-50**

Abrahamic covenant; A hierarchical covenant is comprised of 1. A **mutually binding relationship** between the Lord and His servant. 2. **Sovereign administration** of the covenant. 3. **Conditions imposed by God** (commandments, sanctions). 4. **Promises** of union and communion.

**A Holy Nation**                      **Exod – Josh**

Consecration of Israel, Mosaic covenant, presence of Yahweh, Kingdom of God in Israel.

**A Nation like the other nations**                      **Judg – 1 Sam 15**

Israel's rebelliousness and Yahweh's sovereignty; necessity of human kingship in Israel.

**A Royal Nation**                      **1Sam 16 – 1Kgs 11& 1Chr 1 – 2Chr 9**

Davidic covenant, the glory of the theocratic community, and Yahweh's presence in the temple.

**A Divided Nation**                      **1Kgs 12 – 2Kgs 25 & 2Chr 10 –36**

Israel's rebelliousness and Judah's vacillation; the failure of the Davidic dynasty; prophetic message: remnant, day of the Lord, exile, and restoration.

**A Restored Nation**                      **Ezra, Neh, Prophets**

Restoration: renewal of the covenants.

**Jesus and the Kingdom**                      **Gospels**

Jesus' proclamation, miracles, death, and resurrection; the presence of the glorious kingdom in the Son, renewal of the covenants, the new people of God, preparation for the glorious coming of Jesus.

**The Apostolic Era**                      **Acts & Epistles**

Rule of Jesus, his presence in the Spirit advance of the church, apostolic transmission of the tradition: New Testament writings

**Kingdom and the Church**

Progression of the church; challenge of being a holy and royal people in the world.

**The New Jerusalem**                      **Gen – Revelation 22.21**

Transformation and restoration; a new heaven and earth; redemption of creation; a holy people; the beneficent presence and rule of God and of his Messiah. (*The Progress of Redemption* p.33)

From creation to the New Jerusalem there is an unalterable purpose to history. There is a remarkable symmetry in Scripture: The opening chapters of Genesis mirror the closing chapters of Revelation. The progress of mankind's redemption is implacable; it moves forward in accordance with God's timeline until it culminates with Christ handing over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power - even death itself. When these things are accomplished in the general resurrection from the dead at the great day of judgment, the Son himself will be subject to God who is all in all (1 Corinthians 15.24-28). This is the final page in the history of mankind's salvation and Jesus is its last word.

**MANKIND'S ORIGINAL FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD**

The antediluvians lived exceptionally long lives, but they could not hope to live forever. They had no hope of once again enjoying an Edenic fellowship with God. As with those whose lives are short lived, they could only hope for what might be gained in this present life. Without Christ,

every life remains unfulfilled. Death is a curse, and its reality is all the more tragic because God has put eternity into the hearts of people who inhabit bodies of death. If this were the sum of man's existence, his circumstance would be hopelessly bleak. But there is more. God breathes into the soul of man his own Spirit; a Spirit that is neither fragile nor fleeting, and from his Spirit there comes to mankind a life that is freed from its slavery to death. This new life is effervescent and eternal. Everyone, regardless of nationality, age, education, or station in life who trusts the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, who believes that Jesus died in his place and that God has raised him from the dead, will be saved (Romans 10.9-13). The Christian may be confident that what God has promised will become a reality (indeed, it is a reality): *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8.32). The believer may set his soul at rest regarding his final state if he will but set his mind on the things of God and the resurrected Jesus (Colossians 3.1-3). Television dramas graphically depict death as a part of our “entertainment package,” but the reality of one's own death is something that few Americans seriously contemplate. However, the unexpected death of a relative or friend is a reminder that one is mortal and that he has very little time to prepare for the eternity that lies before him (Ephesians 5.15-16). The Christian has already died and his life is hidden with Christ in God. When Jesus appears, the believer will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3.3,4). So, Christians ought to be careful not to fall into the sin of exchanging that which is immortal for that which will perish (Romans 1.21-25). Rather, they should keep their eyes fixed on *the author and perfecter of their faith* (Hebrews 12.2), because they are being prepared to spend eternity with Him (Hebrews 12.22-24).

While this life is precious and to be highly valued, it is nonetheless fleeting and only preparatory for eternity (Hebrews 11.13-16). The apostle John writes that the life Jesus gives to his children is abundant and full (John 10.10). Everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life. He will never die; even though his body dies, his immortal soul will not die. Rather, with the death of the body, the soul, that which is immortal, will be immediately in the presence of the Lord and will remain with him forever. At a future time (known only to God) there will be resurrection of his body from the dead (1 Thessalonians 4.13-18). After Lazarus died, Jesus journeyed to Bethany to comfort the sisters of his friend. He told them: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”* (John 11.25). Of course, the penetrating question is, do you believe this? If you are saved you must believe it. Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of the gospel (Romans 10.9-13). God gives everyone who believes in Jesus the right to become His children: *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God* (John 12.12-13).

The Christian's confidence that he has eternal life (a present reality) as a result of his or her faith in Jesus' vicarious atonement emboldens him to live and, if necessary, die for Christ (Galatians 2.20). Such was the testimony of the martyrs in Revelation: *They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of*

*the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (Revelation 12.11). The practical implication of the resurrection is that the believer may live his or her life with loving abandonment for God, knowing that he or she has an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed... (1 Peter 1.4-9).*

#### UNIFIED CREATION

There is a day coming when heaven and earth will be unified under the headship of Christ (cp. Ephesians 1.10). The one who is in Christ has already become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5.17), but the day is coming when creation itself will be renewed. Paul writes that *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8.19-22; cp. Isaiah 55.12-13).* This is what God has always intended. Man will no longer be confined by the shackles of sin inherited from Adam. He is a new man, recreated in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2.10) and he will, in the general resurrection, become like Christ (1 Corinthians 15.49). This new world was envisioned by the prophet Isaiah: *“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isaiah 65.17).* The apostle John sums up his message of the Apocalypse with a similar kind of imagery: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21.1-4).*

#### CONCLUSION OF ALL THINGS

In Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (1.15-23) he gives us a glimpse of the heavenly realm, that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor mind conceived about the things that God has prepared for those who love him (cp. 1 Corinthians 2.9). The Holy Spirit reveals these things to his church so that they may anticipate a future as the bride of Christ (Revelation 21.9). The New Jerusalem has no need of a temple because Lord God Almighty himself and the Lamb are its temple. God will be the source of its light and the Lamb will be its lamp (Revelation 21.22-27; cf. Isaiah 60.19-20). Everything will be unified and subject to Christ, and Christ will be subject to the Father.