

3. Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that no resurrection of the dead means no gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore no Jesus Christ as He is proclaimed in the gospel. If there's no resurrection, then Jesus wasn't resurrected. And if Jesus wasn't resurrected, then the Savior-Messiah of the gospel is an imaginary figure. So also the good news of new creation is a cruel hoax; death remains unconquered, which means the creation remains under the curse and every human being remains in his sin. Resurrection is the essential truth of the gospel; without it there is nothing to be proclaimed, believed or hoped in.

Thus Paul underscored the significance and critical importance of resurrection by considering the implications of it not being true. At least some at Corinth had failed to grasp just how crucial resurrection is to the gospel and the Christ it proclaims, and Paul enlightened them in clever fashion by showing them where their premise of no resurrection left them. He assumed their position, but in order to dismantle and discredit it; the Corinthians were to make no mistake about it: Resurrection from the dead is a fact, demonstrated in Jesus Himself: "*But now Christ **has** been raised...*" (15:20a).

- a. Paul could insist upon this fact because he was an eyewitness of the risen Christ. He knew the truth of Jesus' resurrection, but, more importantly, he understood its significance: Jesus was raised from the dead, but as the "*first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (15:20b). This statement is the centerpiece of Paul's argument and it deserves careful attention.

The first thing to consider is the meaning of "first fruits." As Paul was employing it here, this expression refers to the Israelite law by which the first portion of the earth's produce was to be offered to the Lord (cf. Exodus 23:16 and 34:22 with Leviticus 23:10-20; Numbers 18:8-13). This practice served two purposes. First, it provided a constant reminder to Israel that their provision and prosperity came from Yahweh and not from their own labors (cf. Deuteronomy 8:1-18 with Hosea 2:1-9), but it secondly highlighted the nature and obligation of *faith*.

The "first fruit" was the first part of the land's yield, and offering it to the Lord wasn't so much about giving Him the first and the best as it was about demonstrating faith in Him for the fullness of that yield. By giving to Yahweh the beginning of the harvest, the sons of Israel were testifying to Him – and more importantly to themselves – that they believed and trusted Him for the rest of the harvest. The first fruits represented both the *beginning* of the harvest and the *assurance* of the fullness to come. Thus it embodies three fundamental aspects:

- 1) First of all, the first fruit *shares the same substance* with that which follows after. It is the beginning of the one and same harvest.
- 2) Second, the first fruit is *distinct in time*. It is one with the whole harvest, but separated from it by some time interval.
- 3) Finally, the notion of first fruits implies *promise* and therefore *faith* – it implies and calls for confident assurance regarding what is promised.

As it applies to Jesus' resurrection, the concept of "first fruits" shows that His resurrection cannot be considered as unique to Him – either with respect to its substance or its extent. By designating it a "first fruits," Paul was indicating that Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the reality that is "resurrection." That is to say, resurrection is a singular reality which has a manifold manifestation: Resurrection was realized in Jesus, but not completed in Him. Just as it is with the first fruits of a harvest, so it is with Jesus' resurrection: Resurrection is *one* and is *true* in Jesus, but so as to *begin* with Him as the *promise* of the fullness to come.

A second thing to note is that Paul designated Jesus the first fruits *of those who have fallen asleep*. He insisted that Jesus was indeed raised from the *dead*, but then immediately explained that His resurrection established Him as the first fruits of those who *sleep*. Though many commentators make "dead" and "sleeping" effective synonyms, Paul's decision to change terms in the same sentence was clearly intentional and so must have had a purpose. Three observations are helpful in determining that purpose:

- 1) First, Paul used the same terminology of "sleep" throughout the context (ref. 15:6, 18, 51), and in every other instance it refers to the state of those who have died *in Christ* (cf. also 11:30 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
- 2) Second, it's important to recognize that Paul's statement applies the term "sleep" to *Jesus'* death, but as His death culminated with His resurrection (cf. again 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff). Though Jesus' status as "first fruits" focuses on His resurrection, it equally applies to His death; He, too, "slept" in death, but so as to await His "awakening" in resurrection.
- 3) Jesus' "sleep" of death anticipated and yielded to His resurrection, but this pattern only began in Him. It was to be repeated in the experience of every human being found in Him. Jesus' sleep of death and awakening to the life of resurrection is the paradigm for all of His saints.

It seems, then, that Paul employed the term "sleep" to refer to the death state of Jesus Himself and, by extension, to every person who dies sharing in His life. "Sleep" thus characterizes Christians who have died in distinction from deceased human beings in general. This topic will be discussed further, but at this point it's important to recognize why the concept of sleep is such an apt descriptor for deceased Christians (and Jesus Himself in His death). Two reasons make the case:

- 1) First, sleep involves a *living* state, but one which *transcends* the natural, "waking" existential dynamics of consciousness, time, space, interaction, etc. The sleeping person's consciousness is a dream state which has him still *functioning* in space and time, but in a way which isn't *bound* by the definitions and limitations of waking consciousness and the laws of the natural world. For instance, in the consciousness of the sleep state, a person is able to fly and move from one place to another instantaneously.

- 2) Secondly, and of great importance to Paul's argument here, the sleep state is *non-ultimate* and *inferior* to the waking state. For, although the sleep state transcends the waking state in that it liberates the sleeper from the boundaries and limitations of physical laws and physical existence, it is *unreal* and *untrue*. This being so, if a person is to live authentically in conformity to the truth, his sleep state must yield to waking existence as the human state which *is* true – the state which conforms to existential reality as it actually is. Thus, while the sleep state is *transcendent*, it is also unreal and therefore *transitory*; the ultimacy of truth demands that sleep must finally yield to the waking state as true and ultimate.

So it is with the dynamics of Christian death and its goal in resurrection:

- At death, Christians enter into a state of existence which transcends the existence they knew while living (at the very least in the fact of their disembodiment). They are “alive,” but in a way that is less than true – a way that necessarily anticipates emergence into fully authentic existence.
 - Thus Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that Jesus was raised from the dead, not as an animated corpse or even as a person returning from the dead to his previous form of existence. *Jesus was raised as One who “awakened” from a surreal, less-than-true human state into the “waking” state of true and ultimate human existence which His “sleep” of death anticipated and, at the appointed time, eagerly yielded to.*
 - Jesus' resurrection was, in this manner of speaking, His waking from the sleep of death into the “conscious state” of consummate humanness. But He was raised in this way as the first fruits of the faithful dead, and therefore as the pledge of their awakening. Their “sleep,” like His, is an imperfect state of anticipation – a time of longing for the day of waking when death will be forever swallowed up in life (15:42ff; Romans 8:18ff).
- b. The concept of first fruits depicts the relationship between Jesus' death and resurrection and the death and resurrection of His saints. It highlights the crucial truth that believers participate in His resurrection rather than experience their own separate and unique resurrection; quoting again from Torrance, the resurrection of Christians proceeds from Jesus' resurrection “*more by way of manifestation of what has already taken place [in Him], than as new effect resulting from it.*”

The concept of first fruits shows that Jesus and His people share in one and the same resurrection, but it doesn't explain *why* that is the case. The answer is that Christians share in their Lord's resurrection precisely because they share in *Him*: Their resurrection is His resurrection because their life – which is to say their *resurrection* life – is His resurrection life lived out and perfected in them (cf. John 6:52-58, 7:37-39, 10:7-10, 11:20-26 and 14:15-20 with Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 3:1-4; etc.).