

# 1 Cor. 15.1-11: Resurrection (1)

- **Problem.** There were “some” at Corinth that were saying, “*There is no resurrection of the dead*” (v.12). It was this false doctrine that gave rise to the correction and exposition of this chapter. This was likely a small number of troublemakers seeking to influence the whole company.
- What is clear is that none of the Corinthians denied the resurrection of Christ (v.11). They could not be saved otherwise! For the Corinthians, the word ‘resurrection’ meant a return to an embodied life after death. Perhaps they believed the resurrection of Christ was one of a kind – not to be repeated in the experience of believers. Furthermore, in the ancient world, there was widespread confusion about ‘resurrection’. The confusion at Corinth was a result of their experiences with pagan philosophies and religions.
- First, there were some, the Sadducees included, that denied any thought of an afterlife and therefore derided the thought of resurrection altogether (Acts 23.8). This was also the belief of the Epicurean school of philosophy (Acts 17.18). They believed that people simply ceased to exist when they died, giving rise to the maxim of v.32 (like the atheist today). The traditional founder of Tarsus (Paul’s hometown), Sardanapalus, believed just this. Perhaps there was some of this influence at Corinth at which Paul takes aim especially in **vv.1-34**.
- Second, most Greeks believed in an afterlife for the soul but could not conceive of bodily resurrection (cf. Acts 17.32). Many Greek philosophers considered the human body a prison, and they welcomed death as deliverance from bondage. A basic tenet of ancient Greek philosophy was dualism (generally attributed to Plato). “*Dualism considered everything spiritual to be intrinsically good and everything physical to be intrinsically evil. To anyone holding that view the idea of a resurrected body was repugnant. For them, the very reason for going to an afterlife was to escape all things physical. They considered the body a tomb or a corpse, to which, in this life, their souls were shackled. For those Greeks, their bodies were the last things they would want to take along to the next life.*” (MacArthur). Their concern seems to be verbalised in v.35, “*How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?*” It is therefore likely that some were denying, or at least could not understand, the future bodily (physical) resurrection of the saints. Paul addresses this in **vv.35-50**.
- Third, Hymenaeus and Philetus had caused trouble in *Ephesus* (approximately *ten* years after 1 Corinthians was written) by insisting the resurrection (in some spiritual sense) had taken place already, leaving no future event for which to hope (2 Timothy 2.18). This is Paul’s concern in **vv.51-58**.
- **Position.** Given the serious nature of their error, one might think this chapter was better served at the beginning of the epistle. But keeping it at the end highlights its importance, and ensures the gospel receives emphasis both at the *beginning* (1.18-2.5) and *end* of the letter. Grasping the fundamentals of the gospel would preserve God’s people from much error. In addition, this false teaching could have been the root cause of their difficulties. If the physical body is inherently evil, and worthless, then immorality isn’t serious (5)! And obvious manifestations of the *spiritual* (over the physical) and *sensational*, like tongues, is to be lauded (12-14)!
- **Parts.** The chapter breaks into *four* main sections:
  - **Preaching of Resurrection** [vv.1-11]. Paul rehearses the gospel message they had heard and received. One of its basic pillars was the resurrection of Christ. This truth was therefore commonly accepted by all believers and fundamental to the faith.
  - **Problems of Denying Resurrection** [vv.12-34]. The logical outcomes of such teaching undermine the *Person* of Christ, *preaching* of the gospel and *prospect* of salvation (vv.12-19). It also undermines God’s *programme* of resurrection in the kingdom and eternal state (vv.20-28) and, finally, our *present* service for Christ (vv.29-34).
  - **Properties of a Resurrection Body** [vv.35-50]. What form will resurrection bodies take? There will be a bodily resurrection, but bodies that are changed to suit the heavenly sphere. The present body is earthly, “natural” and subject to decay; the raised body is heavenly, “spiritual” and incorruptible.
  - **Prospect of Transformation** [vv.51-58]. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump!

## The Preaching of Resurrection [vv.1-11]

**v.1:** In vv.1-11 Paul recounts the gospel message they heard and embraced, reminding them that one of the essential ingredients of the message was that Christ rose bodily from the dead. First, Paul speaks of the *importance* of the message (vv.1-2). He is not seeking to *prove* the resurrection, but rather, appealing to the commonly held belief (tradition) of the church. This was something *they* had “received” (v.1) and “believed” (v.11). As such, their very own conversions were living evidence of the truth and power of the resurrection of Christ. “Moreover” or ‘now’ serves to introduce a change in subject from the preceding chapter. The word “declare” means ‘to make known’ by way of reminder. *Three* verbs describe the impact of the gospel on the Corinthians: they “received” it (past), “stand” in it

(present) and are *being* “saved” by it (future, v.2). Any compromise of this message touches the past, present and future of a believer’s experience. As to the **past**, the gospel was “received”, the *aorist* tense referring to a single act of reception at conversion. Salvation is not a process but begins with a crisis experience. The gospel is a message which is received, being taken to one’s heart and mind (approved, accepted and believed). As to the **present**, they “stand” in [en] the gospel (cp. Romans 5.2), suggesting they still accepted and remained loyal to its claims – only “some” had denied resurrection. In a spiritual sense, the gospel had become the foundation of their lives, and given them stability in a slippery world. They had a standing before God which was eternal and sure (cp. Psalm 130.3). **v.2:** As to the **future**, they were “being saved” (present continuous tense). They were already enjoying a rescue process from the wrath of God that would be consummated in eternity. Salvation is an ongoing blessing that is neatly summarised in *three* tenses: 1. We *have been* saved from the *penalty* of sin. 2. We are *being saved* from the *power* of sin. 3. We *shall be* saved from the *presence* of sin. The apostle adds a caveat, “if ye keep in memory” or ‘hold firmly’ (in the mind) [NET] to the pure gospel. This does not indicate doubt on the part of Paul, but signals irony in the light of v.12. To abandon the truth of the gospel by denying resurrection would mean they had believed “in vain”. Clearly there was danger – false teachers were seeking to snatch away the true gospel. The word “vain” [*eikē*] is different to *kenos* (v.10) which means without *result* (or *content*). Here, it means without *reason* (or *cause*); the gospel afforded no ground for belief if Christ was not risen! They had believed for no reason and to no purpose – they were lost, not saved!

**v.3:** As far as the *ingredients* of the message are concerned (vv.3-4), Paul gives *two* pillars of the *foursquare* gospel indicated by the word “that” [x4]. The *two* great central pillars are the *first* and *third* statements that “Christ died” and “rose again” (Romans 14.9). These are distinguished by additional details and the claim to fulfil OT prophecy. The *second* and *fourth* statements function as supporting evidence – the proof of the death of Christ is that “he was buried”; the evidence of His resurrection is that “he was seen”. Of the *four* verbs, ‘buried’ (by Joseph), ‘raised’ (by God) and ‘seen’ (of His own) are all *passive*. The only *active* verb is ‘died’ thus emphasising the voluntary nature of the death of Christ.

The word “for” indicates that Paul is now recalling the very words he had preached at Corinth (v.2). “First of all” does not refer to time, but importance. These words were of *first* importance, representing the fundamentals of the Christian faith. These were also words Paul had “received” by direct revelation from the risen Christ (Galatians 1.12) and “delivered” to the Corinthians with no additions or subtractions – it was a pure message of divine origin. “Christ died for [*hupér*] our sins” emphasises the *sentence* of the cross. Earlier in this epistle the focus was “Christ crucified” (1.23) and the *shame* of the cross. The message was not that Christ *lived*, for His life could only condemn us. Rather He *died*, and that for our sins. The preposition *hupér* (on behalf of) indicates a death *in the interests of* and *for the benefit of* others (cf. John 10.11).<sup>1</sup> Here it signifies that Christ died ‘as a sacrifice for’ *our* sins (WE Vine), paying the penalty and judgment that was our due. All this was “according to the (OT) Scriptures”, evidence that the death of Christ was not haphazard or accidental but planned in the eternal counsels of God. Perhaps Paul had in mind the clear *prophecies* of Isaiah 53, or the typical *pictures* of the Levitical offerings. The death of Christ is seen *typically* (in the Law), *experimentally* (in the Psalms) and *prophetically* (in the Prophets) in the OT.

**v.4:** “He was buried” is the complete evidence of the death of Christ. The very mention of a physical body being buried implies a similarly physical resurrection. Though “according to the Scriptures” probably does not include the statement about burial, it was certainly *prophesied* in Isaiah 53.9, and *pictured* in the ashes of the sin offering being carried outside the camp to a clean place (Leviticus 4.12; Matthew 27.60). The second pillar of the gospel is that Christ “rose again”, or ‘hath been raised’ the *perfect passive* indicating He has been raised by God never to die again. He lives in the power of an endless life. The other three verbs are *aorist*, referring to once for all, historical events. But here, Christ has been raised from the dead with the result that He lives! The effect continues. The result remains. The resurrection of Christ is attributed to both the Father (Acts 2.24), Son (John 10.17-18) and Spirit (1 Peter 3.18). If the Lord was crucified on a Friday, then the “third day” was the first day of the week (Sunday) according to Jewish inclusive reckoning. Again, the resurrection was clearly *prophesied* in Psalm 16.10, and *pictured* in the sheaf of firstfruits (Leviticus 23.10-11) and the experience of Jonah (Jonah 1.17; Matthew 12.40), both of which indicate the third day.

**v.5:** The *integrity* of the gospel message that was preached is confirmed by a variety of eyewitnesses. Paul mentions three *individuals* as well as three *groups*, giving perfect credibility and witness. Though the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection were women, they were not accepted as official witnesses in contemporary Roman society. This list is marked by variety – in time, people and places. *Acts 1.3: “To whom (the apostles) also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days.”* The final “that” statement confirms the resurrection,

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<sup>1</sup> There are *three* other prepositions used in connection with the death of Christ:

1. *perí* (Matthew 26.28). His blood and death concerned me, it had something to do with me.

2. *antí* (Mark 10.45). He died instead of me and in my place. The same preposition is used in LXX of Genesis 22.13.

3. *diá* (1 Corinthians 8.11). He died *because of* (on account of) me; I am the reason He died.

“and that he was seen”, or ‘allowed Himself to be seen’ – the Lord took the initiative in selective visible revelations of His identity. With the use of “then” and “after that” (v.6), Paul gives a selective but chronological list of some resurrection appearances beginning with “Cephas” (Peter) on resurrection day (Luke 24.34). Then He was seen of “the Twelve”, an official, collective designation of the Lord’s disciples, though Judas was no longer with them, and Thomas was absent on the first occasion (John 20.19-31). **v.6:** The appearance to more than “five hundred brethren at once” does not seem to be recorded elsewhere in Scripture, but it could be the same occasion as the giving of the Great Commission (Matthew 28.16-20) and would explain why “some doubted” (v.17). In any case, Paul was writing no more than 25 years after the reported event. Whilst some of the 500 had “fallen asleep” (died), the majority were still living and thus their eye-witness reports could be corroborated and confirmed. To fall “asleep” is NT language to describe the state of the body when a believer dies (cf. v.51; John 11.11; 1 Thessalonians 4.14). The metaphor implies rest and peace, but also the promise that, in due course, the body will wake again in resurrection. The language of sleep is never applied to the *spiritual* part of man (such as the soul), only the body. **v.7:** He was also seen of “James”, the Lord’s brother who did not believe in Him during the time of His earthly ministry (John 7.2-9). It was likely this resurrection appearance that brought James to faith in Christ, being later counted amongst the apostles (Galatians 1.19) and becoming a leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15). The appearance to “all the apostles” (collectively) involves a wider group of people than merely the Twelve, though inclusive of them (see notes on 12.28). This was likely at the end of the 40 days at the ascension (Luke 24.44-49; Acts 1.4-8).

**v.8:** “Last of all” indicates that the resurrection appearances of Christ concluded with the appearance to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road. It was special and unique, a bodily appearance of the risen Man in glory, speaking of Himself in humility as “Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 22.8). One qualification of apostleship was to be an eyewitness of His resurrection (cf. 9.1; Acts 1.21-22). Paul clearly believed he was the *last* to meet this requirement; there would be no more apostles after him. Paul describes himself as “one born out of due time” [the *ektrōma*], a word literally referring to any kind of premature birth (abortion, stillbirth, or miscarriage) and came to be used figuratively to refer to something freakish (Gordon Fee). It is possible this was a term of abuse used for Paul by his enemies at Corinth. The Roman historian Suetonius tells of *ektrōma* being used as a label for Roman senators who were unworthy of such a dignified office. Perhaps, then, Paul is acknowledging his own unworthiness to be called an apostle (cf. vv.9-10). Alternatively, he may be describing himself as one who lacked the normal ‘gestation period’ of accompanying the Lord during his earthly ministry – he was ‘untimely’ born. It is also possible Paul saw himself as a microcosm of the nation of Israel, and therefore as one born *ahead* of time. His conversion was a pattern of the remnant of Israel in the tribulation – they will also see Christ in glory and repent. **v.9:** “For” explains the unworthiness Paul felt. He considered himself the “least” of the apostles, and not even “meet” (fit) to be called an apostle because he “persecuted” the “church of God” (at Jerusalem). Paul’s humility and thankfulness that he was an object of grace, not judgment, is often evident in his language – “the chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1.15) and “less than the least of all saints” (Ephesians 3.8). **v.10:** Such grace was evident in his *salvation* and inspired him in his *service*. It was God’s grace that had transformed Paul’s life from *persecutor* to *preacher* and *antagonist* to *apostle*; grace made Paul what he was – “I am what I am”. And that grace was not “bestowed” on him in “vain” [*kenós*], i.e. unproductively or unsuccessfully. No! He “laboured” more and harder than any one of the other apostles (cf. Romans 15.19-20). But even so, Paul does not boast in his accomplishments – he was only the willing instrument of the grace of God. All had been accomplished by the energy and strength of grace. So, grace *motivates* us to serve (cause) but also gives us the *muscle* to serve (effect). The grace of God and a sight of the risen Christ had inspired Paul to a life of labour for the Lord. The same should motivate us all! In summary, Paul was a *late* apostle (v.8), *last* apostle (v.8), *least* apostle (v.9) and *labouring* apostle (v.10)!

**v.11:** So, and in conclusion, whether it was the preaching of the apostle Paul, or any other apostle, the message was the same! The gospel they heard and believed was the common preaching of all the apostles – a message universally received and confessed by every believer. And this message centred on resurrection! Any deviation from this truth was therefore a deviation from the commonly held belief of all the churches.