

Biblical Context

Paul has addressed many issues pervasive in the Corinthian church. It has become evident that the Corinthians had been looking through their worldly lenses. At every turn, Paul urges them to look through the lenses of the gospel. At the crux of Paul's letter comes the centrality of Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:2; 15:3) and resurrected (6:14; 15:4). Jesus' death was confirmed by his burial and his resurrection confirmed by his appearance to many witnesses; all of this fulfilled what had been prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. This truth, Christ crucified and resurrected, is central and non-negotiable for the Christian faith. The church's existence in Corinth is evidence of the powerful message of the cross. Though Paul confronts them on a number of issues, from the outset, he recognizes they are recipients of grace, of spiritual gifts, and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit (1:4-9). The Corinthians knew that Christ raised from the dead was a central message of Paul, and essential to Christianity, yet their theology had become askew. In light of their spiritual arrogance and over-realized eschatology the issue of the resurrection of the dead had come to the forefront. From their perspective, they had arrived spiritually, and had believed that the kingdom had already come. Thus, in their view, there was no anticipated resurrection.¹

Having laid out the assurty of both Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-10) and reminding them that this has been the content of what he has preached, which they have received, believed (15:11; cf. 3:5), and by which they are being saved (15:2), Paul now follows the implications of their faulty theology. "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (15:12b).² If, as some Corinthians posited, there is no resurrection of the dead, then logically, Paul asserts, not even Christ has been raised (15:13, 16). Thus this becomes the hypothetical premise of his following argument. "To deny the resurrection of the dead is to deny the resurrection of the one who makes any and all resurrections possible."³ If Christ is not raised, then the preaching of the gospel message is in vain, as well as Christians' faith, and they are all still in their sins (15:14-15, 17). To deny the resurrection of Christ is to continue to bear the guilt and shame of the former life (cf. 6:9-11) and thus remain in anticipation of divine judgment. There is also no hope for those who have already died (15:18). Thus, the apostles and witnesses of the resurrection would have been preaching a lie and misrepresenting God (15:15).

Both Paul and the Corinthians believed Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:1-2, 11). However, having demonstrated the logical conclusion of the Corinthians' theological folly, Paul comes back to reality by utilizing a contrasting statement, "But now (νυνί δέ, *nuni de*) Christ *has* been raised from the dead..." (15:20a). Jesus is referred to as the firstfruits (ἀπαρχή, *aparchē*) of the those who have died (15:20b), implying a future "harvest."⁴ While we have all inherited death by Adam, all who are in Christ have hope of being resurrected "each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming (παρουσία, *parousia*) those who belong to Christ" (15:23).⁵ Thus the resurrection of believers follows the coming of Jesus (cf. Matt 24:30-31; 1 Thess 4:13-18). After this, Jesus

¹ For Resurrection, see Dan 12:2; Matt 24:31; 25:52-53; Mark 13:27; John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; Rom 8:23-24; 1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 John 3:2.

² It is suggested that the "some" which doubted the resurrection of the dead are the same that struggled with arrogance (1 Cor 4:18) and scrutinized Paul (9:3). These are the ones who have been sowing division and undermining Paul's apostleship and gospel message. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 821. The problem for the Corinthians was not that there was life after death, but that the dead are to be raised from the grave in a new bodily form.

³ Fee, 822.

⁴ "Firstfruits is a metaphor 'derived from the OT where it denotes the first portion of the crop (or flock) which is offered in Thanksgiving to God. As such, the term signifies the pledge of the remainder, and concomitantly, the assurance of a full harvest ... the first installment of that part which includes, as by synecdoche, the whole.' ...Theologically it suggests that our resurrection is not wholly separate from Christ's resurrection, but earlier and later parts of the same event, with the earlier part serving as a promise and guarantee of that which is yet to come." Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 761.

⁵ Paul has already referred to Christ as firstfruits (*aparchē*), implying a future harvest, but now mentions "those who belong to Christ at his coming (*parousia*)" (1 Cor 15:23). Thus there are two categories present, Christ and those who belong to him. "Those who belong to Christ at his coming" would qualify those who are dead (1 Thess 4:16c) and those who are alive at his coming (4:17).

will deliver the kingdom of saints to the Father having triumphed over every enemy including Satan, demonic forces, and death itself (1 Cor 15:24; cf. Rev 20:14).

Paul continues with his rhetorical argument elaborating on the implications of the Corinthian position that “the dead are not raised at all” and asks, “what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead...why are people being baptized on their behalf?” (1 Cor 15:29).⁶ Baptism symbolizes being identified with both Jesus’ death and resurrection. Romans 6:3-5 says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Whatever the practice might entail, Paul points out that their practice of being baptized for the dead is incongruent with their current position that the dead are not raised, for the very act of baptism identifies and anticipates the resurrection. Paul neither condones nor condemns this practice, but merely points out the inconsistency with their position. Paul asserts that witnesses of the resurrection are in danger every hour because of the gospel they preach, and that Paul even endured persecution at Ephesus because of his preaching. If there was no hope in a resurrection, Paul says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (15:30-32), and pursue a life of debauchery. But there *is* hope.

For those Corinthians who doubt the bodily resurrection, Paul anticipated their questions: “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Cor 15:35). The Corinthian assumption was that resurrection had to do with the reanimation of corpses, which seemed foolish to them. Paul responds to his rhetorical argument calling them “foolish person!” (15:36). Psalm 14:1 says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psa 10:4; 53:1). In Paul’s estimation these Corinthians are acting foolish because they did not take God into account. Unlike animals, birds and fish, Paul likens the resurrection to sown kernel of grain (15:37-49)—“What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural (ψυχικός, *psuchikos*) body; it is raised a spiritual (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) body” (15:42-44a).⁷ Thus the resurrected body is immortal, glorified, and spiritual—adapted to kingdom living. The Corinthians, who in many ways believed the kingdom had already come, needed to be reminded that perishable flesh and blood cannot inherit the imperishable kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50). It is essential, therefore, for the believer to be changed. Through the victory secured by Jesus over sin and death (1 Cor 15:56), Paul assures the Corinthians that not everyone will experience the finality of death. Rather, at the coming (*parousia*) of Jesus, at the last trumpet,⁸ the dead in Christ will be raised imperishable (15:52). In an earlier letter, Paul says that after the dead in Christ are resurrected, then we who are alive will also be changed and be caught up with him (1 Thess 4:13-18). So whether alive or sown in the grave, our living hope is not found in these perishing bodies of flesh and blood. Our hope is in the transformation from perishable to imperishable that will occur at the return of Christ—for in Him we have been baptized into his death, and in Him we will be resurrected into his life.

Connect and Apply

The curse of sin and death no longer holds power over our lives. Paul reminds us that we have “victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57). Therefore, Paul encourages those who find victory in Jesus’ death and resurrection to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

⁶ There is scholarly disagreement on what this verse means. There is no biblical or historical evidence of this practice in early church or pagan contexts. Early church writings condemn the Gnostic misunderstanding of this verse where groups were vicariously being baptized for the dead with intentions of saving them. Ciampa, 781-82. Fee, 846-49.

⁷ Paul used the juxtaposition of “natural” and “spiritual” in 1 Cor 2:14. Here, he uses them to describe the difference between the present body and the heavenly body. Gordon Fee points out that it is not spiritual as in *immaterial*, but *supernatural*, able to live in the eschatological age. Fee, 872.

⁸ “The last trumpet” is a term used in the Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic literature to herald in the end of days (cf. 1 Thess 4:16). Similar terminology is used regarding the Feast of Trumpets, where the theme is related to the resurrection of the dead on the last day.