

10. 1 Corinthians 15



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1 Corinthians 15:1-3

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain. ³For I **handed on** to you as of first importance what I in turn had **received**

A further problem affecting the Corinthian community is that ‘**some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead**’ (15:12). Paul deals with this problem firstly by insisting on the central place of the resurrection of Jesus for Christian faith. It is something which he has ‘received’ and has ‘handed on’ to them and which they in turn have ‘received’. These are technical terms used for the handing on and the reception of tradition (see Galatians 1:9,12; 1Thessalonians 2:13; 2Thessalonians 3:6). Paul has already used the same terms in referring to the Eucharist (11:23).

What he is about to declare to them is essential to the 'good news' (gospel) which he and the Corinthians have in common. It is the good news about Jesus (9:12), which is also the good news 'of God' (1 Thessalonians 2:2,8,9), because it is from God, and because what is revealed in Jesus shows us who God really is and what it is that God wants for us. God chose Paul to proclaim this gospel to them (1:17), and he has committed himself faithfully to carrying out this mission (9:16,18). He reminds them how they welcomed the gospel. It is the foundation and the very essence of the new life which they are now experiencing, a life which is leading them to salvation. This is 'the grace in which we stand' and 'our hope of sharing the glory of God' (Romans 5:2). It is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Romans 1:16).

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

I handed on to you what I in turn had received:

that the Messiah 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 and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Paul takes these experiences as known and familiar to his readers. The expression ‘**appeared to**’ does not of itself indicate a miraculous seeing with the eyes. Paul is stating that the risen Jesus allowed certain people to experience in some way his living presence.

I Corinthians 15:8-11

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Finally he speaks of himself. Earlier in the letter he asked: ‘Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus the Lord?’ (9:1). He acknowledges his past as a persecutor of the church. Yes, he was a persecutor, but he can also point to his record as an apostle to demonstrate his fidelity to the commission given to him (see 4:12; also Galatians 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:5). Paul takes no credit for any of this. It is all due to ‘the grace of God that is with me’ (see 4:7).

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if the Messiah is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then the Messiah has not been raised; ⁴and **if the Messiah has not been raised,**

- our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.
- We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised the Messiah — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then the Messiah has not been raised. ¹⁷If the Messiah has not been raised,
- your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.
- Then those also who have died in the Messiah have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in the Messiah, we are of all people most to be pitied.

1 Corinthians 15:20-22

But in fact the Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in the Messiah.

Paul's intention is not to make a dogmatic statement about Adam, but to make use of current ideas to make a statement about the Exalted Jesus. Just as Adam, according to this interpretation, is the first human being in whose seed all humanity exists, and just as Adam's death set the pattern for the death of every human being, so, because of what Jesus has done, the life which he received in being raised from the dead is offered to every human being: **'all will be made alive in the Messiah'**. Paul has already insisted on the central place in their faith of the resurrection of Jesus. Now, by speaking of Jesus as the **'first fruits'**, he is assuring them that what happened to Jesus is meant also for those who share Jesus' life.

1 Corinthians 15:23-25

All will be made alive in the Messiah. ²³But each in his own order: the Messiah the first fruits, then at his coming [παρουσία] those who belong to him. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For 'he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (Psalm 110:1).

God will have complete victory over every power that opposes him (compare Ephesians 1:20-21). God's will is to exercise this dominion through the Risen Jesus (see 8:6). Christians are already experiencing this power in their lives, but incompletely. The outcome of the present time of struggle is not in doubt.

1 Corinthians 15:26-28

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet’ (Psalm 8:7). But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection’, it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

Paul has a most hopeful vision of God’s design for the goal of history: ‘all will be made alive in Christ’ (15:22), and ‘God may be all in all’ (15:28). Being love, God will not force his design, but it is God’s will to offer this life to all for our acceptance.

1 Corinthians 15:29

Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised on their behalf?

Paul returns to the illogicality of their position, this time from the point of view of their behaviour. It seems that some of them were being baptised vicariously for the dead. Paul makes no comment on the custom itself except to highlight the illogicality of such a practice if there is no resurrection of the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:30-34

And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you – a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Isaiah 22:13). Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals” (Menander, *Thais*, fragment 218).” Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

‘We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself’ (2 Corinthians 1:8).

‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? (Mark 12:24).

1 Corinthians 15:35

But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised?

With what kind of body do they come?

The word 'body' for Paul denotes the whole human being as we relate to others, to creation and to God (see 5:3; 6:13-15). Basing his argument on the design of God as revealed by Jesus, he has been arguing that the resurrection of the dead is an essential element of Christian faith. God wants everyone and the whole human person to share in the life of his risen Son.

The question now arises: what will our humanity be like? When those who have been raised come with Jesus at the parousia, 'with what kind of body do they come?'

1 Corinthians 15:36-38

³⁶**Fool!** What you (singular) sow does not come to life unless it dies. [John 12:24] ³⁷And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

Paul switches to the second person singular. This helps us understand the expression '**Fool**'. He is playing the school master. He is asking those who are concerned about this matter to realise that they are showing their ignorance of God. He wants them to put aside any argumentative attitude they may have (they will learn nothing that way) and to take on the attitude of a student who is willing to listen and learn. Paul scolds the imaginary pupil for not realising that the risen body would have to be quite different from the body we know now. He illustrates his point by drawing there attention to the difference between a seed and a plant.

I Corinthians 15:39-41

Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

The second illustration is based on an outmoded cosmological theory. The stars were thought of as living and immortal (and, in that sense, among Greek philosophers, as 'divine'). It is not useful as exemplifying transformation (earthly bodies do not become heavenly), but it does illustrate well the fact that there are many different kinds of bodies. The perishable element ('flesh') of living terrestrial bodies differs from one kind to another. The imperishable element ('glory') of living celestial bodies also differs from one kind to another. Since the risen body is a celestial creation, Paul envisages it as having the properties of such bodies: immortality, glory, and power – very different from our present terrestrial experience. Once again observation of nature warns us not to try to imagine the kind of risen body we will have as though it will replicate the body we now experience .

1 Corinthians 15:42-44

So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

- What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.
- It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory.
- It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.
- It is sown an ensouled [ψυχικος] body, it is raised a spiritual [πνευματικος] body. If there is an ensouled body, there is also a spiritual body.

As he writes elsewhere: 'He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:21). In place of the body which we now experience, a natural body energised and enlivened by the human soul, our whole being will be an expression of our communion with God, energised and enlivened by the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 15:45

⁴⁵Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul' [ψυχη, Genesis 2:7], **the last Adam became a life-giving spirit** [πνευμα ζωοποιουν].

Attention is once again drawn to Adam (see 15:22-23). The way we live and relate now (our 'body'), is patterned on that of Adam. We are fashioned from dust but we live by the breath that God has breathed into us. We are a 'living soul' (Genesis 2:7). By contrast, we experience the risen Jesus as a '**life-giving spirit**' (see also 2Corinthians 3:6). His way of being (his 'body') is 'of heaven', not from the dust. It is a 'spiritual body'. Our risen bodies will also be an expression, not of our human soul, but of our relationship with the divine Spirit.

In calling Jesus the 'last Adam', Paul is declaring that he is the first man of the final goal of history. He is also declaring that the first Adam was in view of the last: human beings have as their natural goal to be in the image of Jesus. In our risen state we will be like the risen Jesus, the 'man of heaven', 'conformed to the image of God's Son, in order that he might be the first-born within a large family' (Romans 8:29).

1 Corinthians 15:46-50

But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Neither the living (“flesh and blood”) nor the dead (“the perishable”) can defeat death (demonstrating in a final way the folly of any vainglory or boasting). It is Christ and Christ alone who has defeated death.

I Corinthians 15:51-53

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

Paul speaks in terms of a change of clothes. Ultimately, it is the life of the risen Jesus that we are 'putting on'.

1 Corinthians 15:54-58

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (Isaiah 25:8). “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (Hosea 13:14) . The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Paul paints a picture of Death as a giant scorpion, injecting into us the poison of sin in order to bring us under its power. The Corinthians would have been exposed to the thinking of the travelling cynics who disparaged all law as being only an instrument of the powerful to shackle nature. Is Paul, too, saying that law is under the control of sin?

Before the terror of death, Paul can break into a prayer of thanksgiving, for we are already experiencing the victory of the risen Christ whose Spirit is transforming our lives by conquering sin in us and so robbing Death of its prey. His readers should live in such a way as to make this obvious. Our bodies are to be transformed, and so we must live, now, in this mortal body, without sin, and ‘**excelling in the work of the Lord**’.