

1 Corinthians 15:1-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 1 to 34 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, 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. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not 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.

[1 : 08] Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed. 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 be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

[2 : 06] For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive, but each in his own order.

Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.

But when it says, all things are put in subjection, it is plain that he is accepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour?

[3 : 12] I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord. I die every day. What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?

If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Do not be deceived. Bad company ruins good morals. Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning, for some have no knowledge of God.

I say this to your shame. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Paul moves to a new issue, the resurrection. This is the last of the major issues that he tackles in the letter.

He doesn't seem to be responding to questions that the Corinthians have written to him about here, though, as in the case of the earlier matters. Rather, this is likely something that has been reported to him by particular persons in the church.

He has previously mentioned such reports concerning the sectarianism in the church, the man who was having sexual relations with his father's wife, and their appalling behaviour at the supper.

[4 : 13] It may be easy to read this chapter as a self-contained treatise on the resurrection, detached from what has gone before. We might think that it's of a different kind from the earlier issues.

It's an issue more of faulty belief than practice. It isn't about sexual conduct, or behaviour in worship, or community relations. So Paul needs to shift into a doctrinal gear here.

The truth of the resurrection is absolutely integral to Christian faith, and Paul clearly needs to address this question at the end of his letter. However, if we examine this chapter more closely, we should see that it isn't just a doctrinal appendix to the letter, but it draws out a fundamental issue that underlies so many of the others.

It connects very organically with the rest of the letter, and is a very fitting conclusion to the whole thing. The letter began by emphasising the message of the cross, and it ends with stressing the truth of the resurrection.

It addresses the Corinthians' failure to appreciate the logic of gift at the heart of the gospel. This is a gospel about the God who gives life to the dead. This is a gospel about dying to the world and its values in the cross, and being made alive to God in an act of transformative grace.

[5 : 25] The fact that a number of the Corinthians' problems seem to derive from their failure to value the physical body as they ought, suggests that this chapter isn't just an appendix.

There's something about this chapter that addresses core issues underlying the whole of the letter. In chapter 6 verses 13 to 20 we read, Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other.

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body, and God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?

Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh, but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

[6 : 35] You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. The resurrection of the body would seem crassly physical to many of the Corinthians in their super-spirituality.

They are elevated above the realm of the body, and the physical resurrection undermines this. And if they're elevated above the realm of the body, the sort of moral requirements that can be laid upon the body can be relaxed also.

The belief in the resurrection of the dead, while present in apocalyptic Judaism, would have been quite unpalatable to obeying former pagans. A further issue for the Corinthians was their over-realised eschatology.

They believed that they already reigned like kings, and had attained to the heights of spirituality. Paul, in talking about the resurrection of the dead, focuses on something that we must look forward to.

We have not already attained it. We're looking forward to and awaiting it. Richard Hayes notes that Paul ends both of the major sections of the chapter by referring to the importance of the righteous behaviour and labour of the Corinthians.

[7 : 40] It is the expectation of the resurrection of the body in the future that gives weight to our activities in the body right now. And in this first part of his argument in this chapter, up to verse 34, Paul's concern is to show that belief in the resurrection is essential to the gospel.

The first 11 verses articulate the fundamental gospel message, the apostolic witness and the tradition that he passed on to them when he first preached the gospel to them.

This is the message of their salvation itself, and at its core lies the crucifixion of Christ according to the scriptures, his burial, his resurrection on the third day according to the scriptures, and his appearance to the apostles and witnesses.

This message is an essential apostolic tradition. It's the most important thing of all. It's core to the body of teaching that the apostles, as the foundation of the church, were commissioned to communicate.

Paul received this himself, and he passes it on to them. And Paul enumerates and identifies a number of witnesses to the resurrection. The large number of the witnesses, the independent witness accounts, the multiple appearances, the known identities and character of the witnesses, the fact that most of the witnesses were still alive at the time of Paul's writing, and the realistic possibility of investigating and corroborating his claims, all give great weight to the testimony of the resurrection.

[9 : 03] This wasn't something that happened in the corner, with only a few unreliable or inaccessible witnesses. While the resurrection is an event that dramatically alters the character of all human history, it is a historical event that occurred in time and space.

It was also a physical event. There was a body in a tomb, and then there was no body there. Beyond the eyewitnesses, there is also the fact that both the event of Christ's death and the event of his resurrection occurred according to the scriptures.

The prophetic testimony of the scriptures is a further confirmatory witness. The witness of the scriptures makes clear that the death and resurrection of Christ are not just powerful miracles proving God's power, nor are they just anomalous events.

Rather, in these events, the story that the entirety of scripture tells reaches its climax. And here we should probably recognize the fuller way in which the apostles following Christ read the Old Testament.

They saw genuine promises of resurrection in places where we, with our dulled reading, might not see them. So places in the Psalms, for instance, you will not let your Holy One see corruption.

[10 : 12] Things like the stories of scripture, the story of Joseph, Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah in the belly of the big fish, prophecies in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and elsewhere. All of these scriptural witnesses could be marshaled to show that the events of the death and resurrection of Christ did not just happen by accident.

They were events that fulfilled God's promises and purposes that had gone on since the foundation of the world. Paul himself is a witness of the resurrection. He is an appointed apostle.

He is not merely testifying to some tradition that he receives secondhand. We might ask what exactly the Corinthians were denying. Were they denying that there was some sort of post-mortal existence?

At points, that may be possible. Were they claiming that the resurrection had already occurred, but was some inner and spiritual event? In scripture we do read of such persons. Then they might be thinking that the resurrection was not a bodily event, but the Christian faith is merely about the deliverance of the soul.

Most likely there's some variety and mixture of these positions at play in the Corinthian church. It seems to me, however, that the key issues surrounded the question not of post-mortal existence as such, but bodily resurrection.

[11 : 26] Of course, if there were no bodily resurrection, the fact of Christ's own bodily resurrection, so central to the apostolic gospel message, becomes a problem. If Christ is not bodily raised, the gospel message and the salvation that rests upon it swiftly unravel.

The apostles turn out to be unreliable witnesses. Indeed, the sheer weight of the unreliable testimony that they will be bearing would throw everything else that they said into doubt. Not only would their preaching be in vain, though, so would the Corinthians' faith.

The salvation that they proclaimed would be proven empty. The Corinthians would be still in their sins. Christians who had died would have entirely perished. And Christians would be a pitiable group of people, enslaved to an empty hope.

Yet, of course, none of these things are in fact the case. Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first sheaf that guarantees the greater harvest.

The resurrection isn't just an event that sets Christ apart. It's the opening of the womb of the tomb. There is the direct connection between Christ's resurrection and our own.

[12 : 34] Christ's resurrection has significance for all humanity in him. Adam's death brought death to humanity, but Christ's resurrection is the source of life for all who belong to him, the new humanity formed as his body by the Spirit.

We should note that our resurrection is a participation in Christ's resurrection, rather than a situation where we and Christ are just participating in a common event. Paul writes in Philippians chapter 3 verses 8 to 11, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

This all happens in an appropriate order. Christ, the firstborn of the dead, the one who opens the womb of the grave, is raised first. Then at the end, when Christ returns, the rest of us are raised with him.

This will lead to the final defeat of death. Christ has been raised to God's right hand, and he will reign there until all enemies have been subdued. Paul alludes to Psalm 110 verse 1 here, one of the most popular Old Testament verses in the New Testament.

[14 : 06] It's a verse speaking of the Messiah's exalted authority. The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. This may possibly also be a reference to Psalm 8 verses 3 to 8.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honour.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

Psalm 8 is used to refer to Christ's exalted authority as the second man and the last Adam in the book of Hebrews. The truth of Christ's ascension is also brought forward by Paul then against the denial of bodily resurrection here.

If the dead are not raised, then Christ's victory is incomplete. The final boss, death itself, is left unvanquished. Many have seen a sort of subordinationism in Paul's remarks about the father's relationship to the son here.

[15 : 18] However, it is important to bear in mind that this reveals triune relations in terms of the creator-creature framework. The passage also refers not to the eternal relation between father and son, but to the culminating moment in the great drama of redemption, the moment when the submission of the son arrives at its perfect completion.

The submission of the son in these verses is not a reference to the eternal and broken relation between father and son in the Godhead, but to the climax of the work of the incarnate son when his mission arrives at its final telos.

This is the reality of his authoritative obedience being fully and utterly realised, and the complete divine authority he has affected is exhaustively related back to the father as its source.

A closer look at this passage reveals the mutually defining relationship between father and son. All divine authority in the world is put into effect through the son, and without him no divine authority is affected.

All things are put under him. Indeed, the son's bringing about of the divine authority is the precondition for the father's being all in all. On the other hand, it is the father who exhaustively authorises the son.

[16 : 29] The father places all things under his son. The son renders all things up to the father. It's important to read this in terms of earlier teaching in the book, in places like chapter 8, verses 5 to 6, which speaks of the oneness of God, father, son, and spirit.

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Both the authority of father and son are comprehensive, the only distinction between them being prepositional. It is from the father and for the father.

It is through the son. There is another expression of the unity of God in chapter 12, verses 4 to 6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

One spirit, one Lord, one God. And the result of this is the completion of the pattern, and God being all in all, as all things are placed under Christ's feet, and he renders them all up to the Father.

[17 : 45] Paul changes tack in verse 29, trying to show that if the resurrection is denied, the practices of the church and Christians lose their meaningfulness and credibility. Indeed, they become a sort of foolishness.

And the first example he gives here is one that has caused all sorts of speculation. It's the example of baptism for the dead. The meaning of this expression, and whatever the practice to which it refers is, has produced endless debate and speculation.

Is it deathbed baptism? Is it the washing of dead bodies? Is it ritual or ceremonial washing after touching a corpse, according to the Jewish law? Perhaps it is baptism with reference to departed martyrs or faithful Christians.

Perhaps it's response to their martyrdoms or in some association with them. Maybe it was some kind of vicarious or proxy baptism. Perhaps living people were being baptised on behalf of people who had already died.

Or perhaps it refers to people being baptised out of the desire to be reunited with those they had known and loved and who had died before them. Such a motive for baptism would require a very strong belief in the resurrection of the dead.

[18 : 53] Anthony Thistleton argues for this view and I think this is probably the most persuasive of the options out there. Most of the other options entail some sort of straining of the language that Paul actually uses here.

It's important to consider the connection between baptism and Christ's sufferings in the flesh. We see this in Luke chapter 12 verse 50. I have a baptism to be baptised with and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.

Our connection to Christ in baptism is focused upon the body. It's focused upon the reality of the resurrection also. In Romans chapter 6 verses 3 to 14 we read, Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised 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.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

[20 : 03] Now, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him.

For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law, but under grace. In baptism, then, our bodies are marked with a seal of resurrection. In baptism, the church confesses its confidence in the resurrection of the dead, Christ's resurrection in the past, and our anticipation of our participation in his resurrection in the future.

It matters that baptism is performed upon our physical bodies. Some people will get baptized with this reality particularly foregrounded. They have lost loved ones and throw themselves upon Christ, the victor over the grave, so that they too may be delivered from the clutches of death by his grace and be united in his resurrection and the general resurrection with those whom they have lost who testified to his power over the tomb.

[21 : 29] This, I believe, is the most compelling way to understand Paul's reference to baptism for the dead. Beyond this, Paul refers to the fact that he's constantly putting his life on the line for the gospel.

He's facing fierce and vicious opposition, something that he can metaphorically refer to as wild beasts. These are people seeking his life. And it's completely foolish to do this if, in fact, there is no resurrection.

If it were the case that there were no resurrection, the best thing to do would be to enjoy life in the flesh now as much as possible. Faithfulness in the present rests upon our confident hope of the raising of our bodies to new life.

And the behaviour of some of the Corinthians was driven by their failure to consider future hope and the way in which our bodies will be raised. And they have meaning in the present as a result of that fact because they have a destiny and a future in which they have a part.

Paul's discussion of the resurrection here now gets at the very heart of some of the problems in Corinth. A question to consider.

[22 : 36] How could we elaborate and fill out Paul's teaching that Christ's resurrection is not merely the resurrection of one individual, but the inauguration of the resurrection, the general resurrection of the dead that is awaited by God's people?