
Bible Knowledge Commentary - 1 Cor 15:1-34

C. Counsel Concerning the Resurrection ([chap. 15](#))

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C. Counsel concerning the Resurrection ([chap. 15](#))

Some have suggested that Paul reserved this chapter on the Resurrection till last because he thought that a firm belief in it would help solve many of the Corinthians' problems. Certainly if the message of Christ crucified were foolishness to the Greek mind ([1:23](#)), the corollary doctrine of the Resurrection was no less so (cf. [Acts 17:31-32](#)). The implicit denial of the Resurrection on the part of some may be seen in the Corinthian conviction that the present era represented the consummation of God's material blessings ([1 Cor. 4:8](#); cf. [6:2](#)) and sexual immorality was a matter of no lasting consequence ([5:1](#); cf. [6:9](#), [13-14](#)).

Like the problems previously discussed ([1:10-6:20](#)), the denial of the Resurrection by some in the church was a matter apparently reported to Paul ([15:12](#)) and not something the Corinthians themselves had included among their questions in their letter to him (cf. [7:25](#); [8:1](#); [12:1](#); [16:1](#), [12](#)). As in his response to the Thessalonian confusion on the Resurrection ([1 Thes. 4:13-18](#)), Paul began with a fundamental affirmation of the faith (cf. [1 Cor. 15:3-4](#); [1 Thes. 4:14](#)) and expanded on it.

1. The Certainty of Bodily Resurrection ([15:1-34](#))

a. Historical Argument ([15:1-11](#))

[15:1-2](#)

1. The Certainty Of Bodily Resurrection ([15:1-34](#))

a. Historical argument ([15:1-11](#))

15:1-2. The gospel Paul had preached in Corinth ([2:1-2](#)) had not changed; but he feared that just as there had been declension in the church concerning the message of Christ crucified and its implication for believers, the same was happening with regard to the message of Christ resurrected. As the former message was an essential element in the Corinthians' experience of ongoing salvation (the pres. tense of the verb **saved** focuses on sanctification), so was the latter. To reject bodily resurrection eviscerated "the gospel" and made faith **vain** (eikē, "without cause" or "without success"; cf. [vv. 14, 17](#)) because it had an unworthy object (cf. [15:13, 17](#)). Believing the gospel includes holding **firmly** to belief in Christ's resurrection. Unless one holds firmly, his belief is "in vain"; cf. [Matt. 13:18-22](#)).

[15:3-5](#)

15:3-5. Paul included himself in the company of all believers when he spoke of receiving the truth of Christ's death and His resurrection on behalf of sinful people. These verses, the heart of the gospel, were an early Christian confession which Paul described **as of first importance**. It was really a twofold confession: **Christ died for our sins** and **He was raised**. The reality of this

was verified by the Scriptures (e.g., [Ps. 16:10](#); [Isa. 53:8-10](#)) and by historical evidence verified by time in the grave and out of it, in the presence of the living. The fact **that He was buried** verified His death, and the fact **that He appeared** to others verified His resurrection. **Peter**, the first male witness, was soon joined by the remaining disciples who composed the Lord's immediate circle.

[15:6](#)

[15:6](#). Later a much larger company of believers witnessed His resurrection. The **500... brothers** may have formed the audience who received the commission recorded in [Matthew 28:18-20](#) (cf. [Acts 1:3-8](#)). Since **most of** those were **still living** when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, they could be consulted.

[15:7-8](#)

[15:7-8](#). Some have debunked this Resurrection appearance as simply the pious vision of believers seeing with the eyes of faith. But Paul could have cited the testimony of two for whom that was not true, **James**, the half brother of Jesus, and himself. Like Paul, James probably came to faith (cf. [John 7:5](#) with [Acts 1:14](#)) because of an appearance of the resurrected Christ ([Acts 9:3-6](#); [22:6-11](#)). Paul considered himself **abnormally born** because he lacked the "gestation" period of having been with Christ during His earthly ministry (cf. [Acts 1:21-22](#)). It seems that **the apostles** were a body wider than the previously mentioned Twelve (cf. [comments](#) on [Eph. 4:11](#)), but were all distinguished by having seen the resurrected Christ ([1 Cor. 9:1](#)) which made Paul the last of their company.

[15:9](#)

[15:9](#). Because he was the last, like a runt, untimely born, Paul could call himself **the least of the apostles**. He felt less deserving of the office because he had been an opponent of the **church** (cf. [Acts 22:4](#); [1 Tim. 1:15-16](#)) which he now served ([2 Cor. 4:5](#)).

[15:10](#)

[15:10](#). He realized, however, that his past was simply a backdrop on which to display **the grace of God** (cf. [1:3](#)), the grace to which Paul had been so responsive. Indeed Paul was without peer in his devotion (cf. [9:19-27](#)). The history of the church confirms that his devotion **was not without effect** (kenē, "empty"; cf. [15:14](#)). He had **worked harder** than any of the 543 other apostles, as he traveled more, suffered more opposition, wrote more New Testament epistles, and founded more churches. Yet Paul knew and ministered with the recognition that it was not his power but God's ([2:4-5](#)) which produced results ([3:6](#)).

[15:11](#)

[15:11](#). In the final analysis it was not the messenger but the message which was important (cf. [1:18-4:5](#)), and in that regard the apostolic message was that the crucified Christ became the resurrected Christ, which message Paul did **preach** and the Corinthians **believed**.

b. Logical Argument ([15:12-19](#))

[15:12](#)

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b. Logical argument ([15:12-19](#))

15:12. Paul then turned to consider the claim of some that no one **dead** could experience bodily **resurrection**. He pressed that tenet to its logical consequences within the framework of the Christian faith.

[15:13](#)

15:13. To deny a bodily resurrection in principle was to deny the **resurrection of Christ**. Presumably some in Corinth had done this, and Paul wanted to warn them and others of the serious consequences which would result from such disbelief.

[15:14](#)

15:14. Not the least of those consequences was the fact that a denial of the Resurrection tore the heart out of the gospel message and left it lifeless. If that were so, the Corinthians' **faith**, however vital, would be **useless** (kenē, "empty"; cf. [vv. 2, 10, 17](#)) since its object would be a dead man.

[15:15-16](#)

15:15-16. Second, the apostles of the church would turn out to be crass charlatans since their message uniformly affirmed the truth of Christ's resurrection (cf. [v. 11](#)).

[15:17](#)

15:17. Third, the Corinthians' salvation would be only a state of mind with no correspondence to reality. Their **faith** would be **futile** (mataia, "without results"; cf. kenē, "empty," in [vv. 10, 14](#), eikē, "without cause" or "without success," [v. 2](#)). The Resurrection was God's validation that the redemption paid by Christ on the cross was **accepted** ([Rom. 4:25](#)). Without the Resurrection there could be no certainty of atonement and the Corinthians would remain in a state of alienation and sin.

[15:18](#)

15:18. Fourth, if Christ were not raised, the loved ones among the Corinthian believers who had died entered not bliss but perdition. The pagan concept of a liberated spirit was a lie. Without the Resurrection the sting of death would remain, with lasting painfulness (cf. [vv. 54-56](#)).

[15:19](#)

[15:19](#). Fifth, if there were no Resurrection, the pagans would be right. The “foolishness of the Cross” ([1:18](#)) would be just that, and men such as Paul and the apostles who had suffered for the gospel ([4:9-13](#)) could only be **pitied**. Those who lived for the pleasure of the moment would be right and the sacrifices of Christians would only be cruel, self-inflicted jokes (cf. [15:32](#)).

c. Theological Argument ([15:20-28](#))

[15:20](#)

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c. *Theological argument* ([15:20-28](#))

[15:20](#). Paul had explored the logical negations which followed from a denial of the bodily resurrection of Christ ([vv. 12-19](#)). He then considered the theological tenet that the destiny of Christians was bound up in the destiny of Christ, and he set forth the positive consequences of this union. Speculation had given way to affirmation: **Christ has indeed been raised from the dead**. And He is the **firstfruits**, an Old Testament word (e.g., [Ex. 23:16, 19](#)) here used in the sense of a preliminary installment of what will be both an example and a guarantee of more to come (cf. [Rom. 8:23](#)).

[15:21-22](#)

[15:21-22](#). **Death came** to all those related to Adam by natural birth because of the disobedience of one **man**. As the father of mankind Adam in his sin brought death to everybody (cf. [Gen. 3:17-19](#); [Rom. 5:12](#)). But because of the obedience ([Phil. 2:8](#)) of another **Man** (1 Tim. [2:5](#)) **resurrection** will come to **all** those related to Him by spiritual birth. Paul would later expand this grand truth in his letter to the Romans ([Rom. 5:12-19](#)). Those who are a part of the body of Christ ([1 Cor. 12:27](#)) will one day follow the lead of their Head ([Col. 1:18](#)), but will not do so immediately.

15-23

[15:23](#). There will be a sequence in the unfolding of the final events. Paul was not concerned to detail all future resurrections since he was addressing the church and was primarily interested here in fixing their place in the scheme of things. As he had earlier affirmed ([v. 20](#)), Christ was their sample and surety.

As He promised ([John 14:2-3](#)) Christ will return for those who compose the church and the dead in Christ will be raised ([1 Thes. 4:16](#)). No time frame was indicated in this sequence but a period of almost 2,000 years has now elapsed.

[15:24](#)

[15:24](#). Following the resurrection of the church, another period intervenes until **the end** when Christ will deliver His **kingdom to God the Father** (cf. [Matt. 13:41-43](#)). Some interpreters dispute that an interval of any sort was hinted at by Paul and find instead the coming of Christ and the consummation of all things as virtually simultaneous events. As in the preceding verse, no time frame was specified and the chronological sequences set forth may indeed be almost

momentary ([1 Cor. 15:5](#)) but then again they may be prolonged (cf. [v. 23](#)). If about 2,000 years can elapse between the first and second phases in this selected presentation of events, a lapse of half that time, that is, a millennium, between the second and third phases should cause no consternation.

[15:25-26](#)

15:25-26. Death as a personification of Christ's ultimate opponent (cf. [v. 55](#); [Heb. 2:14](#)) will be nullified. It is not human bodies which will **be destroyed**, as some in Corinth were saying, but the destroyer of bodies, death itself.

[15:27-28](#)

15:27-28. The reprise of these verses is found in [verse 57](#). It is by the power of **God** that the incarnate **Christ** victoriously mediates His authority (cf. [Phil. 3:21](#)). This work of **the Son** will find ultimate completion in the glory of the Father (cf. [John 17:4-5](#)). That too is the ultimate goal of the church (cf. [1 Cor. 10:31](#); [Eph. 1:6, 12, 14](#)). When God is **all in all** (cf. [Rom. 11:36](#)), the new creation will be consummated and the resurrected Christ and His church will share in that experience (cf. [Rev. 22:1](#)).

d. Experiential Argument ([15:29-34](#))

[15:29](#)

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d. *Experiential argument* ([15:29-34](#))

In this fourth collection of arguments against those who deny the Resurrection, Paul drew on Corinthian practice ([v. 29](#)) and also on his own way of life ([vv. 30-32](#)).

15:29. Up to 200 explanations have been given of this verse! Most of these interpretations are inane, prompted by a desire to conform this verse to an orthodox doctrine of baptism. It is clear from the context, however, that Paul distinguished his own practice and teaching from that described here. He merely held up the teaching of being **baptized for the dead** as a practice of some who denied the Resurrection.

How the false teachers came to this view may never be known, but just across the Saronic Gulf, north of Corinth, lay Eleusis, the center of an ancient mystery religion lauded by Homer (*Hymn to Demeter* 478-79) and widely popular (cf. Cicero, himself an initiate, in *De Legibus* 2. 14. 36). Part of the rites of initiation into this pagan religion were washings of purification in the sea without which no one could hope to experience bliss in the life hereafter (cf. Pindar *Fragment* 212; Sophocles *Fragment* 753). A vicarious participation in the mysteries was not unknown either (cf. Orphica *Fragment* 245). Given the Corinthian propensity for distortion in matters of church practice ([11:2-14:40](#)), it was likely that some in Corinth (possibly influenced by the Eleusinian mystery) were propounding a false view of baptism which Paul took up and used as an argument against those who denied the Resurrection. No interpretation of this text is entirely satisfactory, but this view has as its chief strength the natural reading of the Greek verse, an asset singularly lacking in other explanations. Also it is noteworthy that Paul referred to **those** (not "we") who are "baptized for the dead."

[15:30-32](#)

15:30-32. In contrast to the practice of those cited in [verse 29](#), Paul now mentioned his own lifestyle as a forceful statement of his conviction about the certainty of the Resurrection. Some of the Corinthians may have accused Paul of duplicity (cf. [2 Cor. 1:12-14](#); [2:17](#); [6:8](#)), but no one thought him a fool even though he affirmed that he would be one if he ministered without certainty of the Resurrection. Many times his life was imperiled (**I die every day**; cf. [2 Cor. 6:4-5](#); [11:23-28](#)). At least once he thought he would die ([2 Cor. 1:8-9](#)), probably referred to here as his fight with **wild beasts** at **Ephesus**. Though this was probably not an arena experience, it was like it in that Paul saw no hope of deliverance. Why face that if this life were all there is? The Epicureans (and less philosophical men before them; cf. [Isa. 22:13](#)) would be right—pursue pleasure and avoid pain (cf. Epicurus *Letter to Menoecus* 128). But Paul knew there was 545more, and his life testified to that fact (cf. [1 Cor. 9:24-27](#); [2 Cor. 4:16-18](#)).

[15:33-34](#)

15:33-34. Paul's concluding advice with reference to those who continued to deny the Resurrection was like his former counsel concerning immoral people in the church ([chap. 5](#))—don't associate with them. Previously he had compared immorality in the church to yeast in bread ([5:6](#)). Here he quoted the pagan writer Menander (*Thais* 218) to the same effect: **Bad company corrupts good character**. False teachers should be avoided (cf. [2 Cor. 6:14-7:1](#)) because though they claimed great knowledge they were in fact **ignorant of God** (cf. [1 Cor. 8:2](#)). Were the wise Corinthians this easily deceived? (cf. [2 Cor. 11:3](#))