VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #11
The Concluding Reminder—Bodily Resurrection of the Saints (I)
Chapter 15

Introduction

Having addressed the several issues concerning "abuse" at their public worship, Paul is drawing his letter to an end with one last exhortation in the form of a "reminder". However, as always, the "last word" is always of extreme importance, and in this case, Paul is dealing with an issue not only of immense doctrinal importance, but also of confusion that has plagued many believers, especially those in the modern era.

The issue is: what are the implications and effects of Christ's death and resurrection on us?

15: 1-11 What is the Gospel?

"Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. [2] By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.
[3] For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. [6] After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, [8] and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.
[9] For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. [11] Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed."

15: 1-2 Why do they need to be reminded of the Gospel?

The Corinthian Christians are obviously "saved" by believing in the Gospel, (v.2) and Paul has addressed them as saints in the opening address (1:2). Also, it is through their faith in the Gospel that they have been able to stand firm (2 Cor. 1:24) as Christians.

However, there appears to be something amiss, something that they have failed to fully understood in the "word" through which Paul has passed on to them in terms of the meaning of the entire Gospel message which now, Paul feels obligated to "make known" (the original meaning of the word translated as "remind" in v.1) to them. So, Paul reiterates the central message of the Gospel, not because they do not know, but because they have overlooked or

misunderstood a certain important part of the Gospel the result of which would cause their belief to be "in vain" the meaning of which is made plain toward the end of Paul's reminder in 15:19—you are "**to be pitied more than all men**."

15: 3-8 The Basic Tenets of the Gospel

The basic tenets of the Gospel that Paul received (along with all the Apostles) are now being spelt out:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4] that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

The literal reading of the first part of v.3 goes something like this: "For what I passed on to you, among the first, what I also received…", so it either means that

- This is the Gospel that he and all others (Apostles) have first received—the implication is that this is basic to all that we have been preaching from the very beginning—no variations among us, Apostles, in our Gospel message; or as most translations would have it:
- These tenets are of first and most importance.

The two basic tenet of the Gospel:

1. The Christ died for our sins
2. Christ was raised on the 3rd day.

Paul's emphasis is also on Christ's fulfillment of OT prophecies, hence the repetition of the word, "according to the Scriptures."

But, if we read carefully these two verses, there are actually three and not two basic tenets of the Gospel that Paul has laid out, the third (or rather the 2nd) is "**He was buried**."

These days, as we preach the Gospel, we definitely emphasize on His death which has acted as our atoning sacrifice for our sin—the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous—thereby appeasing the wrath of God on our behalf. (I John 2:2; 4:10; I Peter 3:18).

However, the early Fathers understood with Paul, the importance of the burial of Jesus, hence its inclusion in the Apostles' Creed: "The early church was in no doubt about the reality of Jesus, and the fact of the burial is evidence of this (it is mentioned in all four Gospels.) While Paul does not explicitly mention the empty tomb, these words are the necessary prelude to it and seem to imply it. From the *burial* Paul moves to resurrection on the third ay and the *burial* has implications for it too. 'if He was buried, the resurrection must have been the *reanimation of a corpse.*'" (Morris, 202*, Italics mine*)

This appears to be the understanding or implication of the central Gospel message that the Corinthians needed to be reminded of, and it will be the subject of the rest of chapter, except that Paul wants first to assure them of the certainty of His (bodily) resurrection.

The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

Here, Paul is not so much interested in the detailed timeline nor the entire witnesses of Christ's resurrection; he only cites incidents that are important to take away any doubts among the Corinthians. As a result Paul makes mention of the following:

- **"that He appeared to Cephas…**
- **the Twelve…**
- **more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time…**
- **James…**
- **then to all the apostles…**
- **last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."**

No doubt, the Corinthians hold Peter, the Twelve (i.e. Minus Judas) and James in the highest regard:

- it is interesting to note that Paul always calls Peter by his Aramaic name, Cephas, except in Galatians 2:7f.
- The Twelve, obviously is the special term used of the twelve Apostles chosen by Jesus (Luke 6:13) and would logically exclude Judas by this time.
- This is the only place that mentions about the more than five hundred of the brothers having witnessed Jesus after His resurrection at the same time—a powerful rebuttal of the claim that His post-resurrection appearance was a phantom—Paul reaffirms its truthfulness by saying, " **most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep".** Even at this point, Paul is building up his reminder of the full meaning of our resurrection by calling those who died in Christ as having "fallen asleep".
- James is likely the Lord's brother—"It is not unlikely that it was this appearance that led to his conversion and through him to that of the other brothers." (Morris, 203)
- Since the Twelve have already been mentioned, the reference to "all the apostles" would refer to the rest of the disciples accompanying the Twelve (likely included in passages like Matther 28 and/or Acts 1.)
- Paul puts himself as the last in line, which would be factual in terms of timeline, but his emphasis is on his being "abnormally born".
    - This normally is a pejorative term that has likely been used by Paul's opponents (within the church of Corinth?), and in Greek it is used of someone horrible or a monster, although the actual meaning is that of "abortion", "miscarriage" or "premature birth." (Bauer's, 246)

This passage is such a powerful testimony of Christ's resurrection that has silenced many skeptics down the centuries, and is also a powerful tool for us to bear witness for Christ as well today.

15: 9-11 "My First Name is Grace"

"[9] For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me

was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. [11] Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed."

I think we cannot help but be confused and ask, "Is Paul saying he is the least or the greatest among the Apostles?"

I think, Paul genuinely feels and recognizes that he is the "abnormally born"—likely referring to the pejorative meaning of being a "monster"—for having persecuted the church of God

- Thus, he is really not worthy to be "born again" as one of God's children or a part of God's church, let alone being an "Apostle"!
- This is why I jokingly call his first name, "Grace" which I am sure Paul would have agreed.

But why would he mention that "No, I worked harder than all of them"? Is he not bragging?

- Paul obviously foresees our objection in this respect, which is why he twice mentions the grace of God
    - In saving him, "I am who I am"—yest unworthy, but nonetheless, saved—warts and all;
    - But also in appointing him an Apostle—which is also the grace of God
- But it is also important to remind the Corinthians to take what he has said and what he is going to say seriously
    - What he is going to say is not just his to preach, but is being preached by all the other Apostle
- But should he mention that "**No, I worked harder than all of them"?**
    - In any case, he is quick to add that it is, after all, nothing but grace!

15: 12-19 Will Christians then be raised like Christ too? Or does it matter?

"**[12] But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? [13] If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. [14] And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. [15] More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. [16] For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. [17] And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. [19] If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**"

As Paul puts so much emphasis in proving Christ's resurrection to the Corinthians, one could almost hear the murmurs among them, "That's exactly what we have believed and are saved. So, what's your point, Paul?"

Well, the point Paul is trying to make is: "**But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"** (v.12)

This presumably is what's been reported to Paul as well that some of them do not believe in their own resurrection or that of the dead in Christ. Many have put forward many theories about why some of the Corinthians would not believe in the resurrection of the saints, perhaps they still hold on to the Greek view that the soul is immortal, but not the body which is regarded as the "tomb" of the soul.
I agree with Morris' view in this respect and that is because "the fact that Christ has risen with Christ (*already, according to* Rom. 6:5-8; Cpl. 3:1-4, etc.—*italics, mine*) they may have held that the resurrection life believers live now is all the resurrection there is." (Morris, 206). This, I find, is still a common misconception of many Christians today.

Perhaps, the incomprehensible thought of the bodies of the dead for centuries, if not for millennia, have turned to into ashes or cremated still could be raised causes many to doubt if the resurrection of the dead is at all possible! But we do know that "nothing is impossible with God." (Mathhew 19:26, Mark 10:27)

Whatever the reason(s) might be, Paul launches into a most passionate clarification of this important doctrinal error of theirs.

v. 13 "**If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."**

- Paul points out that Christ's resurrection and ours are inter-related, and this we all agree as in Romans Paul has clearly pointed out that we, believers, have been united in Christ both in His death and His resurrection (Rom. 6:5ff). However, do we realize the significance of such a union? Paul will go on to explain, but first, he points out that if such (i.e. our resurrection) "were" not true then, since we are untied with His Death and we will not be raised, that means Christ has never been raised. The <u>implications</u> will be:
    - V. 14: "**our preaching is useless and so is your faith"—**useless as in being "empty"
        - Our gospel is a sham, and
        - We are not saved!
    - V. 15: "**we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."—**meaning that they all either lied about seeing the Risen Lord, or He is a mere phantom (which the Lord Jesus refutes by saying to those who saw Him, "**It is I myself—Touch me and see; a ghost (*spirit*) does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have**." (Luke 24:39)—yes, the Lord's resurrection is a bodily resurrection, He Spirit is always alive—just as He told the thief on the cross that the very night of His bodily death, "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23:43)
    - V. 17: "**your faith is futile; you are still in your sins**."—that is basically a reiteration of v.14 in that while the death of Christ is an atonement for our sins, not just ours but for all humankind's, the victory over sins lies in His resurrection which not only proves that death (which is a result of sins) does not have the last word in our lives, but that the power of sin is completely broken—the consummation of this victory (as Pau later asserts in the last part of this chapter) will happen when the dead are raised upon Christ's return. (1 Cor. 15:51ff.)

- V. 18: "**Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost"—**By reminding them that those who have died in Christ have only fallen asleep, Paul is trying to show the absurdity or illogicality of their error which, if it "were" true, would mean that these "dead" Christians have actually died forever, not asleep!
- V.19 "**If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**"—finally, Paul points out the ultimate hypocrisy of our faith, if there "were" no hope for our own resurrection.
  - Basically, we would be a "deluded" people and we trying to con people into the same "delusion", and
  - We are not unlike all other religions in the world, offering some kind of psychological comfort and hope for this life that cannot solve the core problem of humankind which is sin (and our eternal separation from God, our Creator).

Some call this section Paul's use of logic in the negative:

- If Christ has not been raised, He only bore our sin on the cross, but without victory over sin!
- Since we, who believe, have been united in His death, if we will not be raised either, then the logical conclusion is—the One with whom we are united, has not been raised either!

15: 20-28 Christ, the first fruits of Resurrection

"20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.
24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 28 When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."

With his forceful clarifications of the "must" and implications of our union with Christ's death and resurrection, Paul now returns to the ultimate accomplishment of God's eternal plan of salvation put into motion by Christ's resurrection and its consummation upon His return.

15: 20-23 Christ is the 1st fruits of Resurrection:

Now, Paul deals with the events of Christ's return which will bring about the final consummation of God's eternal plan of salvation, which is marked by the resurrection of the dead of the saints.

Two points are worth-noting (and allow me to quote from Fee):

- "Paul interest (by calling Christ the 'first fruits') is not in its biblical overtones, which have to do with consecrating the first fruits of the harvest to God (cf. Lev. 23:9-14), but in its functions as a metaphor for the first of the harvest serving as a kind of guarantee for the full harvest." (Fee, 749)
- "The 'order' of resurrection is only two. Christ the first fruits; the full harvest of those who are His at His Parousia (i.e. His coming)…This is not to say that Paul *denied* a resurrection of the unjust (Acts 24:15 suggests otherwise), but that it simply lies totally outside his concern in *this* passage." (Fee, 753)

In calling Christ, the first fruits of "**those who belong to Him**", Paul is basically using the teachings which he further develops in Romans 5: 12ff. about the 1st man, Adam, bringing death to all while the other man, Christ, making all alive through His resurrection. However, his emphasis here is the "order" of the two events—Christ's resurrection and then ours.

<u>15: 24-28 The Destruction of the Last Enemy--Death:</u>

When describing the powerful victory of Christ over all His enemies upon His return, Paul is essentially quoting from Psalm 110:1 & Psalm 8:6:

"**The LORD (YHWH) says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand and until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet**." (Psalm 110:1)

"**You made Him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under His feel**." (Psalm 8:6)

Both Psalms refer to God subjecting all things to Christ:

- "**For He must reign**" (v.25): points to the beginning of such subjection to Christ upon His own resurrection—"Christ's rule, which by implication began with His resurrection (or subsequent ascension), must continue until Psalm 110:1 is fulfilled." (Fee, 755)
- Upon His return, the total destruction of "all dominion, authority and power"—whether those in the "heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12) or their earthly agents—will culminate to His final victory: "**The last enemy to be destroyed is death**"—the resurrection of the saints.

With the final victory comes the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose of God's eternal redemption—"**so that God may be all in all.**" (v.28)

- It is important to point out that, while Paul clearly understands from the Psalms that "God Himself stands as both the source and the goal of all that is" (Fee, 755), the role of Christ is here described functionally, and not ontologically;
- Christ is raised by God and is empowered to gain victory over all God's enemies with the final victory being the conquering of death upon which the Son will bring everything, including Himself to subjection to God, thus "God may be all in all."
- Many commentators point out that Paul does not say, Father God, but God who may be all in all, signifying that the Triune God is meant by Paul.
- The meaning of "all in all" is indeed too deep for us to comprehend:
    - Perhaps, to think of God being "excluded" from anything and all parts of His creation contaminated by sin, resulting in all creation groaning, "**Not only that but**

we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the <u>redemption of our bodies</u>." (Rom. 8:23)

- But now, with the final victory accomplished, "all" is reconciled to God; "Nothing lies outside God's redemptive purposes in Christ, in whom all things finally will be 'united'…and thus…God's being once again, as in eternal past, 'all in all'." (Fee, 759-760)

<u>15: 29-34 Final Thought on "if" there is no resurrection</u>

"[29] Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? [30] And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? [31] I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. [32] If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."[Isa. 22:13]
33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."[*lifestyle*] 34 Come back to your senses as you ought and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame."

Having pointed out the significance played by our own resurrection in God's ultimate consummation of His eternal plan, Paul now turns to the ethical and spiritual implications of such a denial in the present life of Christians, especially in terms of (1) baptism and (2) evangelism and (3) lifestyle.

<u>15: 29 Impact on Baptism</u>
These two verses rank among one of the most puzzling verses in the Bible. One of the early heretics, Marcion, interpreted this verse literally and baptized those who had died. I would like to share with you Chrysostom's refutation of Marcion and his practice which has been taken up by the Mormon churches.
Chrysostom (AD 347–407) tells how, when one of the Marcionite catechumens died without baptism, they would place a living person under the dead man's bed and ask whether he desired to be baptized. The living person would respond in the affirmative and was then baptized as a proxy for the deceased.

This is how Chrysostom argues against such "extreme ridiculousness" by first pointing to the "must" that one gives conscious assent to faith in Christ:
"For it is impossible that any should not be baptized henceforth, this being once devised: and besides, the fault no longer lies with the dead, but with the living. But to whom spoke he, 'Unless you eat My flesh, and drink My blood, you have no life in yourselves' (John 6:53)? To the living, or to the dead, tell me? And again, 'Unless a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God'(John 3:5). For if this be permitted, and there be no need of the mind of the receiver nor of his assent while he lives, what hinders both Greeks and Jews thus to become believers, other men after their decease doing these things in their stead?"

Then, he refers to rites of baptism to explain what Paul means by baptism for the dead:
"As thus: after the enunciation of those mystical and fearful words, and the awful rules of the doctrines which have come down from heaven, this also we add at the end when we are about to baptize, bidding them say, I believe in the resurrection of the dead, and upon this faith we are baptized. For after we have confessed this together with the rest, then at last are we let down into the fountain of those sacred streams. This therefore Paul recalling to their minds said, if there be no resurrection, why are you then baptized for the dead? i.e. the dead bodies. For in fact with a view to this are you baptized, the resurrection of your dead body, believing that it no longer remains dead. And thou indeed in the words makest mention of a resurrection of the dead; but the priest, as in a kind of image, signifies to you by very deed the things which you have believed and confessed in words. When without a sign you believe, then he gives you the sign also; when you have done your own part, then also does God fully assure you." (Homily XL on 1 Corinthians 15)

- Indeed, Paul will not contradict his own teachings, especially that of salvation through faith which he would not give an inch to its distortion, and
- The first readers, the Corinthian Christians, do understand what Paul mean by being "baptized for the dead."

Allow me to further quote from Lenski whose approach is both scholarly and sensible in explaining the preposition "for" (the dead):
"This connection is made plain by the phrase *υπερ <u>των</u> νεκρων*, "with a view to the dead." All efforts to disconnect this phrase from the participle, to which every reader, naturally, joins it, and to attach it to the main verb: "what shall they do, for the dead?" have proved, futile. Nor would anything be gained. by such a construction, for the same operation would have to be, performed with *υπερ των αυτων*, in the next question, which cannot be' done since 'they are being baptized' (one word) is the only other, word left. In both instances the preposition indicates *the <u>motive</u>* for the reception of baptism, a duty which *υπερ* frequently performs in classical as well as in New Testament Greek, for instance, in Rom. 15:8. '
The phrase does not mean that the baptism of certain living persons conveys benefit to other persons who are already dead. This would necessitate the absence of the article (*των*); Paul would have to write *υπερ νεκρων*, "*The dead*" of whom Paul speaks are not any persons who are dead but the baptized Christians who died as such Christians in the sure hope of a blessed resurrection. Their example, i.e., their baptism and their godly life and final death in this sure hope, furnishes the *<u>motive</u>* that prompts the living also to desire and to receive Baptism for the same blessed purpose. Paul's question; therefore, has this sense: that all who are thus moved to receive baptism have no hope, and their baptism is wholly, in vain if there is no resurrection (for Christ and for Christians). This is the force of "Else what shall they do?" etc. This ''is likewise true with regard to the second question: 'If the dead are not raised at all' (if neither Christ nor Christians are raised), why at all are they baptized in view of them" (i. e., the dead)?" (Lenski, 690)

<u>15: 30-32 Impact on Baptism</u>

After the "why" about baptism, Paul now asks rhetorically the "why" of evangelism, given the danger and sufferings he himself and his colleagues have suffered for the sake of sharing of the gospel.

- Paul is frank with the life-threatening danger they have faced "every hour" and "every day" which is no exaggeration (see the list of his suffering in 2 Cor. 11:23ff.);
- He also describes the persecution he suffered in Ephesus at fighting with wild beasts which is likely a metaphor or he would not have survived to write this letter—Ignatius picks up Paul's metaphor and says that he was "being bound amidst ten leopards" referring the company of soldiers that guarded him. (Lightfoot)

Indeed, if there were no resurrection (of both Christ and Christians), he would be a fool. Why not do as other people in the world do (including the rebellious Israelites of old): "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." (Isa. 22:13)

- This is particularly true of "former" Christians who have decided to leave Christ (or His church) and many of them plunge themselves into a life of licentiousness (not unlike Van Gogh).

<u>15: 33-34 Call to Repentance</u>

This appears to be the case with some of the Corinthian Christians, as some have likely turned into a life of licentiousness with their disbelief of a bodily resurrection of believers, and others within the church, somehow still choose to associate with them. Paul points out that such an association (the literal translation of "company") will lead to corruption of character (or lifestyle).

Earlier Paul says, he does not wish to shame them (4:14), but here, as in 6:5 about them bringing shame to the church by having public lawsuit among them, he admits frankly that he says so to shame them!