

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jeffery Brett

Great Chapters of the Bible: 1 Corinthians 15

When Paul first went to Corinth in about AD 52 or 53, it was a very rich and important city. It was founded by Julius Caesar about a century after the fall of a former city on the same site. Corinth was a great centre of commercial traffic on the route from Rome to the East. It was however a very profligate and corrupt place. Paul's first visit there lasted eighteen months and it resulted in a large company of Christians being formed. While he was there he wrote the two epistles to the Thessalonians. He visited Corinth again in AD 58 and stayed three months. There is very little left today of the city of Corinth, just a small village called Gortho with a few relics of its former greatness.

However, not only was Paul's work there very fruitful, but we today have in our hands the two letters that he wrote to them. These letters, while they are generally corrective in character, form a very important part of Scripture. The Corinthians, as we have said, were a very corrupt people with very low morals but they were also very intellectual. This led them to depart from the simplicity of the Gospel that Paul had preached. That is always the case when we try to understand Christianity by our minds rather than accepting it by faith. There had also arisen some doubt as to the truth of resurrection. This is the great subject of the chapter we are looking at today.

The importance of the fact of resurrection is emphasised by the six times in the chapter the Apostle raises the possibility of things being believed in vain, or for nothing. Indeed it is true that everything we believe in Christianity is of no value if there is no such thing as resurrection. So he begins the chapter by reminding them of the gospel that he had preached unto them at the beginning. "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand: by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I have preached unto you; unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures". As the Corinthians had inflated ideas about themselves because of their gifts and accomplishments, so the Holy Spirit reminds them of the realities of the Gospel, raising the question as to whether they had believed in vain. Some do not like the "if" of this verse because it begs the question, "Am I real in what I say I believe?" If we keep in memory and hold fast to the truth of the gospel, then our lives will prove the reality of our confession. It may be that Paul was worried about some of the Corinthians because of their doubt as to the fundamental truth of resurrection. It is the same today. When we hear those who profess to be Christians casting doubt on the veracity of scripture, then we have to question whether they really believe at all.

There was no doubt about Christ having died, nor of His having been buried. The Old Testament prophesied both of these facts and they were publicly known. Most people today believe these two things. They are recorded in history. It was the third point, Christ's resurrection that was being held in question. So Paul cites six different occasions when the Lord Jesus was seen in resurrection, ending with Paul's own conversion when Jesus was not only risen but glorified. This fact was the prominent theme of the preaching of the Apostles in the Acts and was the basis of the gospel that Paul had preached to the Corinthians and which they had believed.

Now the whole truth as to resurrection hinges upon the resurrection of Christ, as verse 12 indicates. "Now if Christ be preached that He rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" The Apostle then from verse 13 to verse 19 argues in an orderly way the consequences, if there was no resurrection. "But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith also is vain". The denial of resurrection makes everything of no avail. Paul had preached that Christ was risen. Was it true or a myth? They had believed it but if they had believed a myth, then their belief was in vain. And further, the testimony of the Apostles and of Paul was all false, because the basis of their testimony was that Christ was risen from the dead. We do well to test our own hearts, in case there is any doubt with us about this. Many who profess Christianity deny it. But faith believes it and so we are saved.

Then, in verses 17 to 19 Paul states three things that would follow, if Christ is still in the grave. "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable". The first two are terrible things to consider. We are still in our sins. If we do not believe that God raised from the dead the Person who bore our sins then the matter of those sins is not settled. God is not satisfied and we are still liable before God for what we have done. Secondly, some of the Corinthian believers had died. If Christ is not risen they were lost. What a tragedy! Every bright

hope of eternal glory with Christ extinguished in the night of death from where there is no waking! All that Christ can give us whittled down to a kindly example, which if followed, would somewhat improve our short lives in this world! There is no exaggeration in the statement, "we are of ail men most miserable". Every Christian worth that name has deliberately turned his back on the sinful pleasures of this world. So we are in a position of denying ourselves the pleasure we might have had in satisfying our sinful lust, in view of a future, which after all does not exist. That indeed is a most miserable position. But it is not so! Verse 20 says, "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept".

The Apostle turns from the negative line of reasoning to a positive argument. Christ is risen and has become the firstfruits. What does this mean? The feast of the Jews that followed three days after the Passover, was the Firstfruits. What happened was this. At the beginning of the barley harvest, the priest went into the field and cut one sheaf of barley. This was then waved before the Lord. We read of this in Leviticus 23:10-11. That one sheaf was exactly the same as all the rest of the field, but it was the first of the harvest. The firstfruits had in mind a harvest that was like itself, the same life, the same nature, all having sprung out of the death of the seed that was sown. This is a beautiful picture and we must understand its teaching. If Christ is the firstfruits, then His resurrection must involve the resurrection of all that are His. The sweet assurance that we have a hope even if we die, that we shall be raised to be forever with Christ is based on the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead. Give up that truth and we have lost everything! Paul illustrates this by pointing out that because Adam sinned, he brought in death on all his descendants. Everyone of Adam's order dies. But in exactly the same way, Christ has brought in resurrection and all that are of Christ's order live. In resurrection there is an order. "Each in his own rank", says verse 23. Christ rose from among the dead first. Afterwards, at His coming, all who are His will rise from among the dead, leaving the unsaved dead in their graves. "Then cometh the end", when the unsaved dead will be raised. This means that in virtue of Christ's resurrection there will be the complete putting down of every adverse power, so that everything will be subject to God, who will be all and in all.

Let us summarise what we have said. Whereas the denial of resurrection worked out to its logical result leaves us in our sins, and in hopeless misery, the fact of resurrection, accomplished in Christ, lands us in eternal glory.

Verse 29 raises another very practical issue. "Else what shall they do who are baptised for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptised for the dead? And why stand we in jeopardy every hour?" Baptised for the dead is a military idea. Imagine a front line of soldiers. One in that line falls in battle, then one behind him moves up to take his place. Many of the Corinthians had died as martyrs, Paul views the new converts as stepping forward in baptism to take their place, to become new targets for the enemy. Very courageous: but futile and foolish if there is no resurrection of the dead! Likewise, why should Paul endure such persecution as he had recently received at Ephesus when men fought against him like beasts and every day his life was in danger? What an absurd man he was to live like this! If resurrection is a myth, he might just as well live like the rest of the godless world who in effect say, "Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die".

If we think like that, we are being deceived. Not only so, if we base our lives on things that are false, then we will become corrupt in our lives. Paul appeals to their conscience at this point, "Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame", (verse 34). Sadly, it is true today that the lives of those who say that they are Christians but deny basic Christian truths, reflect the fact that they do not really know God.

The Corinthians, having so little knowledge of God and His righteousness, were an intellectual and reasoning people. So Paul anticipates the two questions, what and how in verse 35. "But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" Nothing baffles human reasoning like resurrection and Paul's answer may seem very harsh. "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him, and to every seed has own body". Here Paul uses an illustration from nature. A seed is sown in the earth yet, though its identity is preserved, it comes up with a vastly different body. You bury an acorn and you get an oak tree. So regarding the body of a believer, "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body", (verses 42 to 44). The identity of the body is preserved, as is proved by the four times repetition of, "It is sown", and "It is raised". Nevertheless, the condition in which it is found in resurrection is entirely different. This answers the question, "With what body do they come?"

"How are the dead raised up?" gets a wonderful answer in verses 45 to 54. Though it is beyond us to explain or understand because the power of resurrection is the mighty power of God. Putting it simply, we shall be raised in the image of Christ. Verse 49 says, "And as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly". The Apostle explains this by referring to Adam and then to Christ as being the heads of two races. Adam was created to live on earth and because God breathed into him, he received a soul which could express himself. Adam has reproduced himself in abundance but everyone born of that race is just like its head, born to live on earth,

and then to die because its head brought sin into the world. The last Adam is completely different. Though He is a man, He is a life-giving spirit and the Lord from heaven. He is called the second man. Cain was not the second man even though he came next to Adam, but he was exactly the same as Adam. Just so everyone else born since. Not so the Lord Jesus. He was not a reproduction of Adam. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost and was born of a virgin and a new and original man appeared. But He also is the head of a new race, which will bear His image. "As is the earthly, such are they also that are earthly: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly". We are to be conformed to the image of God's Son, not only our characters, but also our bodies. What a glorious fact! How are the dead raised up? In a condition of perfection and glory!

Verse 50 speaks about the moment when our bodies will be changed from earthly to heavenly, the reason being, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God neither doth corruption inherit incorruption". When we are caught up to be with the Lord in heaven, we shall have bodies that are suitable to that place, not ones marked by sin and disease, but spiritual bodies that can never be attacked by corruption again. The Apostle then declares a mystery. In the New Testament, a mystery is simply something that has never been revealed before. "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed". When it says, "we shall I not all sleep", Paul means not everyone will die. If the Lord Jesus came right now, we will never die, but we shall be changed. This will involve the swallowing up of all about us that is subject to death, and corruptible, and victoriously bring about life in resurrection. This will happen in a moment. The word in the original language is the word, from which we get our word atom. This triumphant change will be instantaneous. The power of God does not require time to do things. One moment we shall be on earth with earthly bodies, the next we shall be in heaven with heavenly bodies. This is the last trumpet. Every battle and call to arms will be finished and over. There will never be another summoning call for the believer. We shall all be at home.

The sense of the greatness of that victory, moves the Apostle to an outburst of exultation. He flings a challenge to death and the grave. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" The victory is already ours. It was won by the resurrection of Christ which has been so fully established in this chapter. The resurrection of the bodies of believers and of our change is the working out of that victory. So Paul says, "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ".

The chapter ends with a "therefore". The momentous truth of resurrection requires an answer from me. If on the one hand it leads to the assurance of the future of the believer, on the other hand it condemns our sitting back and doing nothing for Christ. It is not for us to be fooling away our time eating and drinking; we are to abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that nothing that is really done for Him will be in vain. Everything will find an answer in resurrection. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord". We may correctly cite the creed, where resurrection is a prominent item, but if we really mean what we say, we shall be diligent and untiring workers in the service of the Lord Jesus. May He help us to be such. Amen.

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