

## 1 Corinthians 15.1-58 Paul for Everyone Commentary, NT Wright

### CORINTHIANS 15:1–11

#### The Gospel of the Messiah, Crucified, Buried and Risen

<sup>1</sup> Let me remind you, brothers and sisters, about the good news which I announced to you. You received this good news, and you're standing firm on it, <sup>2</sup> and you are saved through it, if you hold fast the message I announced to you—unless it was for nothing that you believed!

<sup>3</sup> What I handed on to you at the beginning, you see, was this: 'The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible; <sup>4</sup> he was buried; he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Bible; <sup>5</sup> he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve; <sup>6</sup> then he was seen by over five hundred brothers and sisters at once, most of whom are still with us, though some fell asleep; <sup>7</sup> then he was seen by James, then by all the apostles; <sup>8</sup> and, last of all, as to one ripped from the womb, he appeared even to me.'

<sup>9</sup> I'm the least of the apostles, you see. In fact, I don't really deserve to be called 'apostle' at all, because I persecuted God's church! <sup>10</sup> But I am what I am because of God's grace, and his grace to me wasn't wasted. On the contrary. I worked harder than all of them—though it wasn't me, but God's grace which was with me. <sup>11</sup> So whether it was me or them, that was the way we announced it, and that was the way you believed.

The old man made me a cup of tea, and took me through to his sitting room. 'Now you must see this,' he said, passing me a much-handled photograph album. 'This tells you how we came here.'

The pictures told their own story. The happy family at home in Armenia. The sudden journey with what they could carry and nothing else. The key figures—father, grandfather, an uncle. On board the ship. And then the arrival: staying with distant relatives, finding their own home, settling down, making a new life.

'And this is where I come in,' he smiled, turning the last page. 'I'm not really an Armenian, you see.' There he was, a little baby, born just after the family arrived in their new world.

I wanted to know more of the history of this strange, proud people who had retained their sense of identity despite being hunted almost to extinction. He gave me a book, also showing signs of being read many times. 'This gives you the whole picture,' he said. 'When we read this we realize why it's important that we came here and have carried on our way of life.'

Two stories, one old and long, the other sudden and short. Weave them together and you create a new community. And that's what Paul is doing in this passage. He tells how the Christian movement had begun: it's a kind of family album, explaining what had happened to bring this little family to birth in its new existence. He adds himself at the end of the list, though there is something odd about his being there at all. And he gives the tell-tale hints that reveal this story as simply the most recent, and decisive, moment in a much longer story, for which you need the Book, the Book that gives the whole picture and explains why these new events are so important.

The chapter which is now beginning is one of the greatest sustained discussions of a topic which Paul ever wrote. The theme is the **resurrection**—the resurrection of Jesus, and the future resurrection of those who believe in Jesus.

Some in Corinth have a problem with this, as we'll find out at verse 12. But there is a much wider reason why Paul gives this topic such a lengthy treatment and places it here as the final

major theme of the letter. We have seen over and over again that he is trying to get the Corinthians to understand where they are, and who they are, in God's long story. They are in danger of forgetting their roots—the roots which they have because they belong to the **Messiah**, who has brought Israel's long story to its climax. They have to learn to live 'according to the scriptures' (verses 3 and 4): not in the sense that they must take little bits and pieces of the Bible as their guide to life (though they could do a lot worse) but in the much larger sense that the whole Bible tells a story which has now exploded into new life with the Messiah, particularly with his death and resurrection.

If they understand where they belong in this story, so many other things that have troubled them will be seen in the correct light. Think, for instance, how the Messiah's death and resurrection were crucial in the discussion of sexual morality in chapter 6. God 'bought' you for himself through Jesus' death, and God will raise your body to new **life** as he raised Jesus; so who you are and what you do in and with your present body matters vitally. Think how the discussion of the **eucharist** in chapter 11 encouraged the Corinthians to see this meal in the light of the longer story, looking back now to Jesus' death and on to when he comes again. Think of the lyrical passage about love in chapter 13, and how the deepest point there is that love is the thing which will last into the new world that God will make. The fact that there is a new world, that it's already been launched in Jesus' resurrection, and that all God's people will be given new bodies in order to share in it, is basic to everything he has said. This is where the photograph-album illustration can't help; what we would need is some photographs of the future.

Paul wants to be clear that the resurrection is rock-bottom reality for the Christian. It isn't a strange idea that he's dreamed up himself. He and all the others tell the same story; it's already become a carefully guarded tradition (verses 1, 3, 11). The story, in fact, forms the **gospel**, the announcement of the good news of Jesus the Messiah. This was the message that Paul announced wherever he went, and it was this message that carried God's power and brought people, by the **spirit**, into a living knowledge and love of him, into the rule of the Messiah, into the **kingdom of God**. The only point in being a Christian at all is if this message continues to be the solid ground on which you stand.

The message is like the photograph album: this is the story which makes sense of who we are. Here are the snapshots. The Messiah. His shameful death. His burial. His resurrection on the third day. The people who saw him—Cephas, the **Twelve**, five hundred at once, James (Jesus' own brother). Then, at the end of the story, the man born a bit late, torn from the womb just in time to be part of the sequence: the last person to see the risen Jesus before the appearances stopped. Paul himself.

And it all happened 'according to', or 'in accordance with', the Bible. This doesn't refer to the biblical accounts of the New Testament, the gospel stories of Jesus' death and resurrection. They hadn't been written at this stage. Nor does it mean that Paul could quote half a dozen 'proof-texts' of passages from the Old Testament which predicted that the Messiah would die and rise again, though he could certainly have done that. No. The Bible which Paul had known and loved as a young man was like a story in search of an ending; and when Jesus rose from the dead the ending was now revealed. This was where it was all going. You need the Bible not least to remind you what, if this was the ending, the story itself was about; but you need the

gospel to remind you that this was the ending that God himself had provided, giving meaning to the whole thing.

We need to be clear about what the word ‘resurrection’ itself meant for Paul and his hearers. It didn’t mean ‘life after death’. It was never a general term for any and every belief about what might happen to people after they die. It meant, very specifically, that people already dead would be given new bodies, would return to an embodied life not completely unlike the one they had had before.

This belief had begun to be popular in Judaism in the two or three centuries before Paul’s day; but it had always been denied not only throughout the pagan world (with the possible exception of the Zoroastrians) but also by many Jewish groups, including the powerful aristocrats (the **Sadducees**). The point is this: when Paul spoke of Jesus having been raised from the dead, and pointed on to resurrection as God’s promise for all Jesus’ people, nobody in Corinth would have thought he meant simply that Jesus had gone after his death into some kind of glorious but non-bodily existence. (Think about it; if that was what Paul and the others had meant, why did they suggest it happened ‘on the third day’, rather than straight away?) People sometimes talk vaguely about Jesus being ‘raised to **heaven**’, but that simply isn’t what the word meant.

What *sort* of body Jesus had, and what sort his people will have, is an important question. Paul will get to it later in the chapter. But the fact of there being a body is all-important.

Paul’s personal conclusion to this introduction (verses 9–11) serves as a reminder: what we’re talking about here is God’s grace, God’s powerful grace, at work in and through the most unlikely people. But Paul is also careful to underline what the Corinthians already knew, namely that this message was the same, whichever **apostle** was announcing it. The Corinthians had heard Cephas and others. They knew this wasn’t a strange idea that only Paul had spoken of. This was and is the central thing about Christianity.

Christianity, you see, isn’t a set of ideas. It isn’t a path of spirituality. It isn’t a rule of life. It isn’t a political agenda. It *includes*, and indeed gives energy to, all those things; but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either. That’s what 1 Corinthians 15 is all about.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12–19

### What If the Messiah Wasn’t Raised?

<sup>12</sup> Well, then: if the royal proclamation of the Messiah is made on the basis that he’s been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no such thing as resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> If there is no such thing as resurrection of the dead, the Messiah hasn’t been raised, either; <sup>14</sup> and if the Messiah hasn’t been raised, our royal proclamation is empty, and so is your faith. <sup>15</sup> We even turn out to have been misrepresenting God, because we gave it as our evidence about God that he raised the Messiah, and he didn’t!—if, that is, the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead aren’t raised, the Messiah wasn’t raised either; <sup>17</sup> and if the Messiah wasn’t raised, your faith is pointless, and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> What’s more, people who have fallen asleep in the Messiah have perished for good. <sup>19</sup> If it’s only for this present life that we have put our hope in the Messiah, we are the most pitiable members of the human race.

Robert had longed to play in the school football team. He had watched every game since he had come to the school. He had idolized the players and thought about the different styles of play, the different skills that were needed, and (of course) the excitement of running out on to the pitch himself to do his best for the school.

He worked hard at his game, made sure he was fit, and played in one of the junior teams. Then one day a friend came running up to him.

'You've made it!' he said. 'You're in the team! I've seen it on the notice-board! Congratulations!'

Robert was on his way to a lesson at the time and couldn't check the notice-board for himself, but instead spent the following hour in a haze of excitement. It had happened. His dream had come true. Life was going to be different from now on.

As he came out of class, he whispered to another friend,

'I'm on the team! Sam saw it on the notice-board!'

The friend looked puzzled.

'But they never put up the team list this early in the week,' he said. 'Sam must have made a mistake. They wouldn't do that. It doesn't happen that way!'

Robert's state of mind at that moment is exactly the state of mind Christians ought to be in if someone says '**resurrection**? Things just don't happen that way!' People have often tried to reinvent Christianity as something quite different. Some have supposed that to say 'The **Messiah** was raised from the dead' was simply a fancy first-century way of saying 'God's cause continues!' or 'I still regard Jesus as my leader and teacher'. That's all very well if Christianity was simply a set of ethical commands, or if Jesus was simply one guru among others, teaching a way to God which one could follow or not as one chose. There are some today who want Christianity to be that kind of thing. It is, after all, much less demanding on several levels. Sometimes the desire that Christianity should be this sort of thing has even been made a reason for denying that Jesus was raised from the dead. 'We can't say the resurrection happened,' someone once said to me, 'because that would make Christianity different from all the other faiths.'

But the **gospel** which Paul and the others announced was that Jesus was the Messiah—Israel's Messiah, God's Messiah, and hence the world's true Lord. This meant that there was 'another king' (Acts 17:7): a king who would trump Caesar himself, a king at whose name every knee would bow (Philippians 2:10–11). That kingship over the world is precisely what Paul is going on to talk about in verses 20–28. And as far as Paul is concerned the evidence, the demonstration, that Jesus is the true King is that God has raised him from the dead (Romans 1:3–4). This is what he means in verse 12: it isn't just (a) that Jesus is Messiah and (b) that he's been raised from the dead, but that we know Jesus is Messiah, and we announce him as such, *because* he's been raised from the dead. It's only the resurrection that makes the crucifixion appear anything other than a horrible end for another failed Messiah.

Paul's careful argument in this section is designed to show the Corinthians, starkly, what would follow if you were to declare that there is no resurrection. Since this is what virtually all ancient pagans believed, the best explanation for why some in Corinth were denying the resurrection is that it made no sense within their surrounding world-view. There was no room for it in the culture they had grown up in. But Paul wants them to see that the Christian world-view is different, and that it has the power at the personal level and the rigour at the

intellectual level to take on the old pagan world-views and win. The resurrection is the foundation of the Christian counterculture. And the immediate results go beyond culture into the world of royal claims: Jesus is Lord, so Caesar isn't.

This takes us, too, into the deeper world of moral and spiritual reality, and by that route into the very structure of the cosmos itself. Paul's strongest argument in this passage is to point up the link between sin and death (verse 17). If Jesus has been raised, the power of death has been broken, and final victory over it is assured (verse 26). Death, as always in biblical thought, is the result of sin, as humans turn away from the life-giving God and vainly attempt to find life elsewhere (see Romans 5:12–14). So if death has been defeated it must mean that sin has been defeated as well.

We could spell it out like this:

1. If Jesus has been raised, that proves he really was the Messiah, since God has clearly reversed the verdict of the court, which found him guilty of being a messianic pretender, and wrote that as the charge above his head. But if he really was the Messiah, and has now been raised from the dead, his death itself turns out not to have been simply a tragic and ghastly end but God's strange means of dealing with the sin of the world.

2. However, if he wasn't raised from the dead, he wasn't and isn't the Messiah, and his cross had no such effect. Sin has not been dealt with; the world is still as it was.

But Paul doesn't believe that for a moment. With Jesus' resurrection, he insists, a new world has opened up, in which the all-embracing power of sin and death no longer holds sway. The world we know—the world whose loveliness, majesty, fragrance and teeming life are mocked by death, decay, corruption and sheer entropy—has heard the news that there is after all a way forward, a way into a **life** yet greater, more beautiful, more powerful, than this one. Take away Jesus' resurrection and all that is put into doubt.

With that, you lose any sense that the individual follower of Jesus really does live in a new world in which the power of sin has been defeated. 'If the Messiah isn't raised, your **faith** is worthless, and you are still in your sins.' What's more (verse 18), Christians who have died in the meantime are dead and gone; when some in Corinth denied the resurrection they were declaring, in effect, that the ancient pagan view of life after death (a shadowy half-existence in the world of Hades) was the best they could hope for.

And, as Paul says, without the hope of resurrection, what is the point of being one of the Messiah's people in the first place? Hated, reviled, persecuted, struggling—if this is all there is, surely it would be better to throw in the towel, to admit that many other philosophies gave you an easier life, and to stop wasting your time with this Jesus nonsense? He will develop this later in the chapter, but already the point is coming through loud and clear.

Those who deny the resurrection, then, are not simply tinkering with one negotiable element of Christian belief. (Not long ago there was a survey among bishops in my part of the church; most of them said they did believe in Jesus' resurrection, but some said that whether or not this was a *bodily* event didn't really matter—you could believe it or not as you chose. That is a total misunderstanding of what Paul is talking about—and Paul is our earliest witness for the gospel itself.) They are cutting off the branch on which the gospel, and those who embrace it, are sitting. They are even accusing the **apostles** of 'bearing false witness' about God himself (verse 15). But, most importantly, they are declaring that no great event has yet happened through which the world has been changed. They are reducing Christianity to a form of

spirituality, a new 'religion' to take its place alongside the others in the marketplace of ancient pluralism. This danger is as present today as it was in the first century.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20–28

### The Reign of the Messiah

<sup>20</sup> But in fact the Messiah has been raised from the dead, as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since it was through a human that death arrived, it's through a human that the resurrection from the dead has arrived. <sup>22</sup> All die in Adam, you see, and all will be made alive in the Messiah.

<sup>23</sup> Each, however, in proper order. The Messiah rises as the first fruits; then those who belong to the Messiah will rise at the time of his royal arrival. <sup>24</sup> Then comes the end, the goal, when he hands over the kingly rule to God the father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power. <sup>25</sup> He has to go on ruling, you see, until 'he has put all his enemies under his feet'. <sup>26</sup> Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, <sup>27</sup> because 'he has put all things in order under his feet'. But when it says that everything is put in order under him, it's obvious that this doesn't include the one who put everything in order under him. <sup>28</sup> No: when everything is put in order under him, then the son himself will be placed in proper order under the one who placed everything in order under him, so that God may be all in all.

'The whole place is a mess. I want you to go in there and tidy it up.'

The chairman of the college council was appointing a new principal, and giving him his marching orders. The college had been in bad shape for a while, and the time had come to sort it out, to put everything in proper order. There are times when institutions can be allowed to develop unchecked, to float free and see what happens; but there comes a time when someone has to take things firmly by the scruff of the neck and bring them back into shape.

The **resurrection** of Jesus was the moment when the one true God appointed the man through whom the whole cosmos would be brought back into its proper order. A human being had got it into this mess; a human being would get it out again. The story of Genesis 1–3—the strange, haunting tale of a wonderful world spoiled by the rebellion of God's image-bearing creatures—is in Paul's mind throughout this long chapter. But his more pressing concern is with the job that the **Messiah** has been given to do. This passage is near the heart of Paul's understanding of Jesus, God, history and the world. It's near the heart of what Jesus himself spent his short public career talking about, too. It's about the coming of God's **kingdom**.

God's kingdom was what many Jews of Paul's day longed for, and we are right to assume that he grew up longing for it too. They imagined that God would become king over the whole world, restoring Israel to glory, defeating the nations that had oppressed God's people for so long, and raising all the righteous dead to share in the new world. Quite *how* this would all happen was seldom clear; *that* it would have to happen, if God really was God, there could be no doubt. And the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth had revealed to Paul that it had happened at last, though not at all in the way he had imagined.

Instead of all God's people being raised at the end of history, one person had been raised in the middle of history. That was the shocking, totally unexpected thing. But this meant that the coming of God's kingdom was happening in two phases. When Paul talks about things happening 'in their proper order' in verse 23, he has two things in mind: the 'order' of events, and the eventual 'order', the putting-into-shape, that God intends to bring to the world.

The order of *events* is explained first. Jesus, following his resurrection, is already the Lord of the world, already ruling as king (verse 25 is as clear a statement as anywhere in Paul of what he means when calling Jesus 'Messiah': he is God's anointed king, already installed as the world's true Lord). Paul understands the present time as the time when Jesus is already reigning. But the purpose of his reign—to defeat all the enemies that have defaced, oppressed and spoiled God's magnificent world, and his human creatures in particular—has not yet been accomplished. One day this task will be complete: the final enemy, death itself, will be defeated (verse 26), and God will be 'all in all' (verse 28). The world will have been put back to rights.

That brings us to the 'ordering' of God's final *putting-into-shape* of the world. In that final 'ordering', the son (this is the first time Paul has called Jesus the son in this passage, but it fits with the clear implication of what he has been saying all along) will be 'placed in order' under the father. Paul never used the word 'Trinity', but at several points in his writing he says things which point towards what later theologians would say. Jesus remains the son, intimately related to the father but subordinated to him. The father shares his unique glory with him (Philippians 2:9–11). If the father is the one *from* whom everything comes, the son is the one *through* whom it comes (1 Corinthians 8:6). And so on. Paul envisages the entire cosmos sorted out at last, put into the shape the creator intended; and part of that shaping is the status of Jesus himself, revealed as the father's true and only son.

Into this picture, of a world put back to rights, Paul has woven several strands taken from the Old Testament. He quotes two psalms which were often used in the early church to speak of Jesus' messianic rule. Psalm 110, quoted in verse 25, is about the king whom God will place at his right hand until all his enemies are brought into subjection. This, Paul declares, is now being fulfilled in Jesus. Psalm 8, quoted in verse 27, belongs closely with this, speaking of God 'putting all things into order under his feet'. But instead of talking about the Messiah, as Psalm 110 does, Psalm 8 talks about the human being. This role, of being under God and over the world, is not just the task of the Messiah; it's what God had in mind from the very start when he created humans in his own image. This is how Paul ties the passage tightly together: the achievement of the Messiah, and his present reign in which he is bringing the world back to order, is the fulfilment of what God intended humans to do (see verse 21). The story told in Genesis is completed by the story told in the Psalms.

At the centre of this story is a point which remains central to all Jewish and Christian thinking, spirituality and hope. Death is the *enemy*.

This is blindingly obvious to anyone who has recently been bereaved—though some, thinking to be kind, have often tried to soften the blow by pretending death doesn't really matter that much, which is a piece of blasphemous nonsense. To say that death is anything other than an enemy is to deny the goodness, beauty and power of God's good creation. And the point of resurrection is that it is the *defeat* of death. It isn't a way of saying that death isn't so bad after all. It certainly isn't a way of saying that after death we go into some other realm, perhaps called '**heaven**' (notice how Paul never mentions heaven throughout this passage). The only thing Paul says here about where people are after they die is that they 'belong to the Messiah' (verse 23), as in verse 18 he had spoken of people who had 'fallen asleep in the Messiah'.

No: 'resurrection' isn't the *immediate* future for those who die; it's what happens at the *subsequent* moment, the moment when Jesus reappears as king (that's what 'his royal arrival'

refers to, picking up the language of the emperor coming back to Rome after being away). At that final moment death itself will be conquered. And, since death is the unmaking of God's creation, resurrection will be its remaking. That, and nothing less, is the Christian hope.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29–34

### Resurrection Gives Meaning to Present Christian Living

<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, what are people doing when they get baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead simply aren't raised, why should people get baptized on their behalf?

<sup>30</sup> And why should we face danger every hour? <sup>31</sup> I die every day—yes, that's something for you to boast about, my dear family, and that's the boast I have in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord! <sup>32</sup> If, in human terms, I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what use is that to me? If the dead are not raised, let's eat and drink, because tomorrow we're going to die!

<sup>33</sup> Don't be deceived: 'bad company kills off good habits'! <sup>34</sup> Sober up; straighten up; stop sinning. Yes, some of you simply don't know God! I'm saying this to bring shame on you.

We stood in the great Colosseum in Rome, and stared at the chambers and passages underneath where the floor would have been.

'This is where they kept the wild animals,' our guide said. 'They used ropes and pulleys to winch up the cages, and then the animals would come out of a trapdoor straight into the arena.' We looked around and imagined the crowd, half the city packed into the vast stadium for a holiday spectacle full of excitement, blood and death. We imagined the gladiators, trained up for this moment, sharing their last meal together the previous night, knowing that by the following day many if not all of them would be dead.

And I thought of Paul, speaking here (verse 32) of fighting with wild beasts in Ephesus. This is strange, because Paul almost certainly didn't actually fight animals in an arena like a gladiator would have done. It seems most likely that he means it metaphorically. Something had happened at Ephesus (that's where he is while writing this letter) which had been, for him, just like fighting wild beasts.

Some people think this is a reference to a huge moral struggle he's had to go through, with the wild animals of temptation coming up from the floor to devour him. Others think it's a battle with spiritual forces, using the weapons of prayer and fasting. I am inclined to think it's to do with the enormous opposition that the **gospel** aroused, not least from those who saw it as a political threat (Ephesus was a great centre of the new imperial cult), an economic threat (if Paul was right, man-made idols were a nonsense, but lots of people made a living by making and selling them), and a religious threat (if Jesus was the world's true Lord, the other gods and goddesses at Ephesus, whose worship was woven into the fabric of local culture, were downgraded). In chapter 19, Acts describes a riot in the huge theatre in Ephesus because of this explosive combination. As far as Paul was concerned, it was like being in the arena, facing a horde of wild beasts, with nothing but the weapons of the gospel for help.

Paul was good at breaking up a heavy discussion with a change of pace and style, and that's what he's doing in this little passage. The point he's making is that if he went through all that in order simply to die, with no hope of **resurrection**, he would be just like those gladiators, eating, drinking and making merry the night before the big show, knowing that this was the end. Paul does not even contemplate the idea, popular though it was in some philosophical circles, that

there might be a wonderful, glorious *non*-bodily life after death. For him, as for most ordinary pagans at the time, if there was no resurrection, then death was basically the end, with nothing much to look forward to.

The other little comments which come thick and fast in this short passage all make the same point from different angles. The question of ‘baptism for the dead’ (verse 29) has long been a puzzle. It may be that some Christians had died without being baptized, and that the practice had grown up (if so, it didn’t last long) of other people undergoing baptism on their behalf as a sign and symbol that they really did belong to the **Messiah**. Or it may be that ‘being baptized on behalf of the dead’ refers to non-Christians who, after the death of close relatives or friends who were Christians, decided to become Christians themselves, undergoing baptism so that they would continue to be with their loved ones in the final resurrection. But, whichever conclusion we come to (and every student of Paul knows that this verse is a difficult one), the overall point is clear. Something the Corinthians knew about as a regular practice makes no sense unless there is in fact a resurrection to look forward to.

His own sufferings, and the dangers he faces, are a further argument (verses 30–31), leading to the passage about the metaphorical ‘wild beasts’. This then brings him, suddenly, to a quotation from the Greek poet Menander: ‘bad company kills off good habits’. What Paul is saying—and quoting a pagan poet is a heavily ironic way of making the point—is that the Corinthian Christians, who ought by now to be able to show and tell the truth of the one living God to their pagan neighbours, are instead continuing to allow the pagan thought-forms of those neighbours to distort and even deny the central beliefs they should be gladly holding. There is a danger, as present today as it was in Paul’s day, of being deceived: it is possible to allow the influence of the surrounding culture and the ideas it promotes to seep into a Christian world-view until the truth has been turned into a lie. Part of the point of the gospel is that, through it, people come to know the true God (see 8:1–6); but some of these Christians have simply forgotten who God is (verse 34). They need the sharp rebuke Paul already issued in 6:5: I’m saying this to make you ashamed.

Nothing in this little section is actually an *argument* that the resurrection (of Jesus, or of Christians) is *in fact* true; it is all designed to say ‘just think what it would mean if it isn’t’. Someone might conclude, from these verses alone, that since it still isn’t true all these consequences really do follow: baptism (especially on behalf of the dead) is a waste of time; Paul has been suffering and struggling unnecessarily; and one might just as well eat and drink and wait for death. But pointing things out in this fashion is useful alongside the formal, step-by-step exposition of the Christian world-view in verses 20–28 and the detailed discussion of the resurrection body which will now follow (verses 35–49). When faced with a new idea, especially the questioning of some central aspect of the faith, the wise Christian will ask: does this fit with what we regularly do as Christians? Does it make sense of the suffering which many have undergone for the faith? Does it show the tell-tale signs of being imported from pagan ideas? And, above all, does it show a true understanding and knowledge of the one true God, the creator, the **life-giver**?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35–49

### The Transformed Resurrection Body

<sup>35</sup> But someone is now going to say: 'How are the dead raised? What sort of body will they come back with?' <sup>36</sup> Stupid! What you sow doesn't come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup> The thing you sow isn't the body that is going to come later; it's just a naked seed of, let's say, wheat, or some other plant. <sup>38</sup> God then gives it a body of the sort he wants, with each of the seeds having its own particular body.

<sup>39</sup> Not all physical objects have the same kind of physicality. There is one kind of physicality for humans, another kind for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. <sup>40</sup> Some bodies belong in the heavens, and some on the earth; and the kind of glory appropriate for the ones in the heavens is different from the kind of glory appropriate for the ones on the earth. <sup>41</sup> There is one kind of glory for the sun, another for the moon, and another for the stars, since the stars themselves vary, with different degrees of glory.

<sup>42</sup> That's what it's like with the resurrection of the dead. It is sown decaying, and raised undecaying. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in shame, and raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, and raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown as the embodiment of ordinary nature, and raised as the embodiment of the spirit. If ordinary nature has its embodiment, then the spirit too has its embodiment. <sup>45</sup> That's what it means when the Bible says, 'The first man, Adam, became a living natural being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

<sup>46</sup> But you don't get the spirit-animated body first; you get the nature-animated one, and you get the spirit-animated one later. <sup>47</sup> The first man is from the ground, and is made of earth; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> Earthly people are like the man of earth; heavenly people are like the man from heaven. <sup>49</sup> We have borne the image of the man made of earth; we shall also bear the image of the man from heaven.

Imagine standing outside a car showroom, a hundred or more years from now. An advertisement has brought you and lots of others to see a new type of car. Different from all that went before, the slogan had said.

'Looks pretty much the same to me,' says one person.

'Well, it's similar,' replies another, 'but the engine seems different somehow.'

The inventor makes a short speech.

'I know it may look like an ordinary car,' he says, 'but what makes this one totally different is what it runs on. We've developed a new fuel, nothing to do with oil or petrol. It's clean, it's safe, and there are limitless supplies. And because of the type of fuel, the engine will never wear out. This car is going to last for ever.'

A fantasy, of course—or perhaps not, since you never know what inventions are going to come next (who in 1880 would have predicted the jet engine or the microchip?). But it gets us to the point of this long, dense and hugely important discussion. What sort of a body will the **resurrection** produce? And what will it 'run' on?

We may as well go to the heart of the passage, to the verse that has puzzled people many times in the past, and still does. In verse 44 Paul contrasts the two types of bodies, the present one and the resurrection one. The words he uses are technical and tricky. Many versions translate these words as 'physical body' and 'spiritual body', but this is highly misleading. That is as though the difference between the old car and the new one was that, whereas the old one was *made of* steel, the new one is *made of* something quite different—plastic, say, or wood, or some as-yet-uninvented metal alloy. If you go that route, you may well end up saying, as many have done, that Paul is making a contrast simply between what we call a 'body', that is a physical object, and what we might call a ghost, a 'spiritual' object in the sense of 'non-physical'. But that is exactly what he is *not* saying.

The contrast he's making is between a body *animated by* one type of **life** and a body animated by another type. The difference between them is found, if you like, in what the two bodies run on. The present body is animated by the normal life which all humans share. The word Paul uses for this often means '**soul**'; he means it in the sense of the ordinary life-force on which we all depend in this present body, the ordinary energy that keeps us breathing and our blood circulating. But the body that we shall be given in the resurrection is to be animated by God's own **spirit**. This is what Paul says in a simpler passage, Romans 8:10–11: the spirit of Jesus the **Messiah** dwells within you at the moment, and God will give life to your mortal bodies through this spirit who lives inside you.

But when the spirit creates a new body, it won't wear out. Here, in order to make the illustration of the new car really work, we would have to say that the new fuel will not only preserve the engine for ever, but the bodywork too. That would be straining even fantasy-imagination a bit far. But we need to say something like that to do justice to what Paul has written here.

Paul does in fact think that the resurrection body will be a different kind of thing to the present one, because in verses 51 and 52, and again in Philippians 3:20–21, he declares that Christians who have not died at the moment when Jesus returns as Lord will need to be *changed*. But the contrast he then makes between the present body in itself, and the future body in itself, is not the contrast between 'natural' and 'spiritual'. That, as we've seen, has to do with what energizes these two bodies, what they run on. The contrast between the two bodies in themselves is stated in verses 42 and 43. It is the contrast between corruption (our present bodies fall sick, bits wear out, we decay, die, and return to dust) and incorruption (the new body won't do any of those things). It is the contrast between shame (we know we were made for more than this decaying, corrupting life, and we are ashamed of frailty and death) and honour (the new body will be splendid, with nothing to be ashamed of). It is the contrast between weakness and power.

We can now stand back from the detail in the middle of the passage and see how the whole argument works.

The first paragraph (verses 35–38) introduces the idea of the seed which is sown looking like one thing and which comes up looking quite different. Paul doesn't of course mean that when you bury a body in the ground, a new one 'grows' like a plant from its seed. The point he is making is simply that we understand the principle of transformation, of a new body in continuity with the old yet somehow different. And he emphasizes particularly that this happens through the action of God: 'God gives it a body.' That's the first thing to grasp: the resurrection is the work of God the creator, and it will involve transformation—not merely resuscitation, as though the seed, after a while underground, were to emerge as a seed once again.

The second paragraph (verses 39–41) establishes a different point: that we are all used to different types of physicality, all the way from the fish in the sea to the stars in the sky. When Paul speaks of some of these physical objects having 'glory', he means of course 'brightness'; but this doesn't mean he's preparing us for the idea that people raised from the dead will shine like electric light bulbs. When he describes the new body as having 'glory', it's in contrast to 'shame' or 'humiliation' (verse 43, and Philippians 3:21), not to 'darkness'. His point is simply to note that there are different types of created physicality, each with its own properties.

Throughout the passage so far, he's been echoing Genesis 1, where God creates the sun, the moon and the stars, and particularly trees and plants that have their seed within them. (As I typed that sentence, a gust of wind blew a little shower of seeds in through the window from the tree outside.) The underlying theme of the whole chapter, remember, is new creation, new Genesis: God will complete the project he began at the beginning, and in the process he will reverse and undo the effects of human rebellion, especially death itself, the great enemy that drags God's beautiful world down into decay and dissolution. Paul will now move to the climax of Genesis 1, the creation of human beings in God's own image (Genesis 1:26–28). As with Jesus' resurrection, so with ours: this will not be a strange distortion of our original humanity, but will be the very thing we were made for in the first place.

The final paragraph (verses 42–49) brings him to the crunch. The ultimate contrast between the present body and the future one is between two basic types of humanness. God already has the new model in store, he says, waiting to bring it out on show at the proper time—though, of course, the prototype, the resurrection body of Jesus himself, has already been launched.

Paul's word for the place where God keeps things safe before unveiling them at the proper time is of course **'heaven'**. When he speaks of the 'earthly' humanity and the 'heavenly' humanity, he doesn't mean that we will 'go to heaven' to become the new type. Rather, God will bring this new humanity, our new bodies, *from* heaven to earth, transforming the present bodies of Christians who are still alive, and raising the dead to the same kind of renewed, deathless, glorious body.

That is the hope set before us in the resurrection; and it is all based, of course, on the fact that Jesus himself, the Messiah, already possesses the new type of body. He is 'the man from heaven'; and, as we have borne the image of the old, corruptible humanity (see Genesis 5:3), so we shall bear the image of Jesus himself (see Romans 8:29). The overall point of the chapter is that in the resurrection of Jesus himself the power of the creator God was at work to bring about the renewal of the world, and that through the work of the spirit this same creator God will give new, glorious, deathless bodily life to all his people.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50–58

### The Mystery and the Victory

<sup>50</sup>This is what I'm saying, my dear family. Flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom; decay can't inherit undecaying life. <sup>51</sup>Look! I'm telling you a mystery. We won't all sleep; we're all going to be changed—<sup>52</sup>in a flash, at the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. This is how it will be, you see: the trumpet's going to sound, the dead will be raised undecaying, and we're going to be changed. <sup>53</sup>This decaying body must put on the undecaying one; this dying body must put on deathlessness. <sup>54</sup>When the decaying puts on the undecaying, and the dying puts on the undying, then the saying that has been written will come true:

Death is swallowed up in victory!

<sup>55</sup>Death, where's your victory gone?

Death, where's your sting gone?

<sup>56</sup>The 'sting' of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup>But thank God! He gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

<sup>58</sup> So, my dear family, be firmly fixed, unshakeable, always full to overflowing with the Lord's work. In the Lord, as you know, the work you're doing will not be worthless.

He stood there in baggy jeans, trainers, and an old sweater. 'You can't come in like that,' I said. 'This is a smart lunch, and we're the guests. We've got to get it right.'

'No problem,' he replied, and within three minutes had changed, as though miraculously, into a dark suit, a smart tie, and polished black shoes. The transformation seemed almost instantaneous.

Of course, social convention doesn't have much to do with the **kingdom of God**. Indeed, Paul had hard words to say in chapter 11 about the social divisions in the Corinthian community. But that's not the point. This passage is all about the instant transformation which will change, not just the outward appearance, but the inner reality of who and what we are.

Paul is here talking about the people—he assumes he will be one of them—who are still alive at the great moment when **heaven** is unveiled, the royal Lord reappears, the dead are raised to their new bodies, and (as he says in Romans 8) the whole creation is liberated from decay to share the freedom of the glory of God's children. There is one apparent problem remaining: what happens to those who are still alive?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 Paul uses picture-language of one sort, borrowed from Daniel 7: we will be caught up on the clouds to meet the Lord as he comes, so that we can then escort him royally into his kingdom, here in God's new world. But in the present passage and Philippians 3:20–21 he speaks of the same event in terms of what happens to the bodies of those concerned. The answer is simple: they will be transformed.

They need to be transformed, because the way they are at the moment is inappropriate for God's new world. It's not just like someone wearing scruffy jeans at a smart lunch; it's like somebody who is, so to speak, *made of the wrong stuff*. At the moment we are people made of corruptible, decaying material; we need to be transformed into non-corruptible, undecaying material, so that we become people over whom death has no more control.

People get puzzled when Paul says 'flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom.' Hasn't he just insisted on the bodily **resurrection**? And isn't 'flesh and blood' a way of saying 'body'? Does he, they wonder, mean after all that the new existence will be 'non-bodily', 'spiritual' in the sense that we insisted he did *not* mean in verse 44?

No. When Paul uses the word 'flesh', he regularly means that there's something wrong with the material in question. Either it's in rebellion against God; or it is perishable, decaying; or both. What he here means by 'flesh and blood' is explained immediately afterwards. The present 'flesh and blood' will decay and die, but God intends to create a world—and, in Jesus, he has decisively inaugurated the project—in which decay and death are not accommodated but defeated. That is the whole point of the present passage, summing up and celebrating the entire long chapter.

The point then is that 'we shall not all sleep'—in other words, not all Christians will die before the great day—but 'we shall all be changed.' We shall be transformed. It will happen in a flash, in a great act of new creation, echoing round the cosmos like the blast of a great trumpet. When this happens, the ancient story which the Bible told in a thousand different ways will come true: the story of creation reaching its intended goal; the story of the enemies being defeated (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Syria and many others—and now the ultimate ones, sin and

death); the story of God's victory, the creator's victory, over all the forces of chaos and destruction.

Paul here quotes from two biblical passages, Isaiah 25 and Hosea 13, which pointed in this direction. But this truth, like that of Jesus' own death and resurrection, is not simply established through one or two proof-texts. It is in line with the entire narrative. Death has claimed a victory, and the pagan world shrugs its shoulders and acknowledges it. The Jewish world at its best declares that God remains the creator and will do a new thing. The Christian message is that he *has already done the new thing* in the **Messiah**, Jesus, and that he *will* do it for all Jesus' people through the power of the **spirit**. And in that new thing death and decay will be gone, swallowed up for ever.

Paul pauses to glance sideways at the ways in which death has worked. It gets its peculiar character, its unpleasant 'sting', through sin, the dark power that entices humans to rebellion, to turn away from God the **life-giver**. And sin gets its particular power, in Paul's world, from the **law**. Paul doesn't explain what he means here, and we need Romans 7:1–8:11 to get inside this cryptic throwaway line. But his main point is clear: through our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, God *has* given us the victory over all the powers that drag us down, he *will* give it to us in the future, and he *is* giving it to us here and now.

The 'here and now' is where Paul ends up. You might think, after a spectacular chapter like this one, that he would conclude by saying something like, 'So let's rejoice at the wonderful hope we can look forward to!' But he doesn't. And this isn't just because he is a solid and sober practical theologian, true though that is. It's because the truth he has been expounding, the truth of the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living, is not just a truth about the future hope. It's a truth about the present significance of what we are and do. *If it is true that God is going to transform this present world, and renew our whole selves, bodies included, then what we do in the present time with our bodies, and with our world, matters.* For far too long many Christians have been content to separate out future hope from present responsibility, but that is precisely what Paul refuses to do. His full-bodied doctrine and promise of resurrection sends us back to our present world, and our present life of bodily obedience to our Lord, in the glorious but sobering knowledge (as we saw in 6:14, 13:8–13 and elsewhere) that, if there is continuity between who and what we are in the present and who and what we will be in the future, we cannot discount the present life, the present body and the present world as irrelevant.

On the contrary. It is a matter of the greatest encouragement to Christian workers, most of whom are away from the public eye, unsung heroes and heroines, getting on faithfully and quietly with their God-given tasks, that what they do 'in the Lord' during the present time will last, will matter, will stand for all time. *How* God will take our prayer, our art, our love, our writing, our political action, our music, our honesty, our daily work, our pastoral care, our teaching, our whole selves—how God will take this and weave its varied strands into the glorious tapestry of his new creation, we can at present have no idea. *That* he will do so is part of the truth of the resurrection, and perhaps one of the most comforting parts of all.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). [\*Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians\*](#) (pp. 201–228). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.