

## Women's Bible Study Spring 2017

*Unity in Love: A study of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians*

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### **Unity in Resurrection (1 Cor. 15)**

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Handel's *Messiah* is one of the great musical pieces in history, giving the whole sweep of the gospel from Old Testament to New. The words were written by a fellow named Charles Jennens. He gave it to the composer Handel on August 22, 1741, and in 24 days, Handel had completed the entire oratorio. At the end of his work Handel wrote *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone the glory). And *Messiah* has continued to glorify God for 276 years.

All of its pieces come from scripture, and six of them are drawn from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, including the wonderful solo "*The Trumpet Shall Sound*".

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 Paul has given us a discourse on death and resurrection that tells us more than any other passage of scripture about the purpose of Christ's bodily return from the grave. So please turn to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 and we will look first at:

#### **I. The Resurrection of Christ**

Paul starts by defining:

##### **A. What it is**

Look at verse 1 of chapter 15:

**"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. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." (1 Cor. 15:1-2)**

This is the passage that ties chapter 15 to the entire rest of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Since chapter 5 Paul has been answering questions raised by the young church at Corinth, like "What should we eat?" or "how should we behave in worship?". Now he comes to a really burning question - what happens after we die? Being Paul, he begins by putting it into a theological framework so that his answer flows from understanding the resurrection of Christ. Because the resurrection is more than just a prelude to us living forever. It is the central point that validates what Christ said about himself. Without the resurrection, there is no gospel.

You see, if we disbelieve that Jesus rose from the dead, it cuts the heart out of everything else he said. Christ died an atoning death for our sins and rose again to prove that he really had defeated death. His resurrection freed us from our slavery to sin, and allowed us to live with God in eternity. That's the gospel.

The other day I heard an NPR program on Faith and Politics in America. One caller said, "I firmly believe in the Christian gospel. But it has absolutely no bearing on what I believe politically, nor on the way I vote." That sounds attractive; wouldn't it be nice to have watertight compartments so that we have faith at church but do what we want the rest of the week? But Paul says here that the gospel needs to leach into all our life - the choices we make with our money, our bodies, our minds and our ballots.

In verse 3 he goes on to explain what the gospel is:

**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” (1 Cor. 15:3-8)**

This sounds like a creed – “what I received I passed on to you.” In other words, Paul didn't make all this up. The truth came from other eyewitnesses who transmitted it to Paul, and now Paul relays it to us. He refers to the scriptures, but of course Paul doesn't mean the New Testament. Rather, the scriptures the Corinthians used were the Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah who would save his people from their sins. Everyone had been waiting for this Savior, and Paul confirms that Jesus is the one they were waiting for – proven by the fact that he rose from the dead.

Then Paul gives the supporting facts. First of all, Peter saw Jesus, then the disciples, and then 500 men and women at one time saw the risen Lord. That's an event we don't have recorded in the Bible, but it's a fascinating footnote. It's hard to suppress the truth when it's witnessed by that many people, who are still living and could be questioned about what they saw.

Next Paul mentions James, the brother of Jesus. And this one line clears up a mystery, for James did not believe that his brother was Messiah while Jesus lived. However, this resurrection appearance may have been the convincing proof. James became one of the great forces of the early church, known as “Old Camel Knees” for his habit of prayer. He wrote the valuable N.T. book of James. So James went from unbelief to belief, likely because of Jesus' resurrected body.

Finally there's Paul, who refers to himself as “one abnormally born”. Literally, this means “an abortion” or “miscarriage”. Paul should not have seen Christ, but in the one to three years after Jesus' death, he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus and became a believer. And this is the last appearance of the resurrected Christ which is recorded in the New Testament.

But Paul wasn't starting with a clear conscience. His shame - the murders and persecution of Christians - lingered with him. Look at v. 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.”** That one verse shows us

### **B. What it does**

The resurrection of Christ changes people. It changed a persecutor like Paul into a believer. It changed timid, frightened disciples into men who gladly died for the gospel. They were sent into the arena to fight wild beasts.. You only fight and die for what you passionately believe in. So the resurrection of Christ transforms us, because it proves that what Jesus said about himself was true.

But

### C. What does it mean for me?

Only God has power over life and death. But in Christ that power becomes available to us, so his resurrection empowers us. It gives us the confidence that **we** can change. With that immense resurrection power of Christ, we can bring life back to dead marriages. We can fight against overwhelming evil. We can gain control over our bodies. The resurrection proves the immeasurable power of God that is now available to us in Christ Jesus. Paul says it best in v. 10:

**“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.” (1 Cor. 15:10)**

Paul was a murderer turned evangelist. And verse 10 is an acknowledgement that every improvement in Paul comes from God's grace. What were you when Christ got hold of you? We should be able to look over our lives and see his Holy Spirit changing us to become loving and forgiving.

So the central fact of Jesus' resurrection is what proves everything else he said about himself. Otherwise, those are just “alternate facts”, not truth. The resurrection empowers us, and it changes us .

Having laid the foundation, Paul turns next to what Jesus' resurrection means in terms of

### II. The Resurrection of the Dead

There was a problem in the Corinthian church. Some of them were teaching that even though Christ was raised from the dead, believers were not. Yet the resurrection of the body is central to our faith. So Paul tackles this issue by asking

#### A. What if it wasn't true?

Look at verse 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?” (1 Cor. 15:12)**

Jesus' resurrection and ours are tied together. In verses 12-19 he goes on to give

#### B. Four consequences of its reality

**#1: If the dead aren't raised, then Christ must not have been resurrected either. (v. 13).**

**#2: If Christ isn't raised, then our faith is useless because it's based on a lie. (v. 14)**

**#3: If Christ isn't raised, we are still in bondage to sin, because it's the atoning death and resurrection of Christ that took care of our sin. (v. 17)**

**#4: If Christ isn't raised, the dead are really dead. We'll never see them again. (v. 18)**

He ends this section by saying, **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Cor. 15:19)**. Because, after all, if Christ didn't rise from the dead, it invalidates everything he said about who he was (the Son of God) and what he

accomplished by his death (our salvation). Believing a lie would make us pitiful. But believing the truth empowers and transforms us.

Next, Paul explains why Christ had to die:

**“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive.” (1 Cor. 15:20-21)**

The firstfruits were the initial part of the harvest which were offered to God before anyone could eat them. The firstfruits showed that the harvest belonged to God and was given to us so we could be thankful. But they were also an indicator of the bounty to come. In the same way Jesus was the firstfruits of the great harvest of souls which would follow his death and resurrection.

In these verses Paul introduces the contrast of Adam and Christ. Adam was the first man, created from the dust of the earth, whose sin affected all subsequent humans. We sin, because the first man Adam sinned and now it's our nature to be estranged from God. But Jesus, the second Man (or rather, God who took on human flesh) has reversed all the effects of the fall by dying and rising again.

You see, death is only in this world as a consequence of the fall. There was no death in the Garden of Eden. And there is no death in heaven. So death came from the first man Adam, and the resurrection of the dead comes through the second Man, Jesus Christ. Each is representative of a whole creation's worth of humanity.

In verses 23-28 Paul explains the order of events. First Christ was raised, then at his return, so will all the dead who die in Christ be raised. After that Jesus destroys everything that stands in the way of God's total dominion, including sin, death and the devil, and presents all to God. **“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.” (1 Cor. 15:28)** And here is this beautiful picture of all the glory, all the victory obtained at the hands of Christ, being laid at the feet of God the Father, who is all in all.

Now just a quick word about verses 29-33. Paul makes a puzzling reference to baptism for the dead in v. 29. We don't baptize on behalf of the dead; this isn't a part of historic Christian belief or practice. So he's either referring to something which the Corinthians were doing locally, or else it's an obscure way of saying that when we are baptized we are consecrating our dying, corrupt human bodies that are headed to the grave. But what is more important is what he says in v. 30-33, which is, “If Jesus isn't resurrected, if the dead aren't resurrected, then why are we suffering and dying for our faith?” In other words, our faith is worthless unless it's for eternity.

So, here's

### **C. What it means for me**

This passage neatly cuts out the option of saying, “I know Jesus was a good man and I try to follow his teachings, but I don't believe he was the Son of God.” Many ethical people appreciate Jesus' words. Without a resurrection that proves his divinity, Jesus is just a man. So it's possible to pick and choose what we want to hear. It's easy to not murder or steal,

and then feel virtuous about ignoring adultery or lying. By ignoring Jesus as the resurrected Son of God we can think that we're not so bad after all.

But the heart is removed from the gospel if we don't identify sin as sin, if we fail to grasp that sin is killing us, and if we remove the power to deal with sin by making Jesus into a good man rather than the Son of God. The power to stop sinning comes only from Jesus, and it comes through the mechanism of his death and resurrection. He proved his words by dying on the cross and rising again. Now when we think about overcoming sin, we know that we have the power to do so because Christ already demonstrated it.

Last February I was spraying tree wound stuff on our apple trees. They had been pruned, and I was covering the cut place with a black sticky substance that seals the opening. Unfortunately, it was windy while I was working. A couple hours later I glanced in the mirror. I was covered with prominent black dots. It took nail polish remover to get rid of them. Without the mirror, though, I would never have known how ugly I looked. The gospel does that for us. Held up to our lives, the gospel reveals the stain of sin in our lives, but it also provides us with the way to remove those stains. NT Wright says that "the gospel isn't a set of ideas. It isn't a path of spirituality...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." (*Paul for Everyone, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, by Tom Wright, page 206*) Jesus' resurrection is the antidote to sin.

So this means two things for us. First, it forces us to acknowledge the whole gospel. If Jesus was raised from the dead, he really is the Son of God and therefore has power over our lives. We're no longer the captain of our own ship. We can't pick and choose from his moral teachings. He's either Lord, or we are missing the point of the gospel.

And second, it means that we need to live as though he is Lord, and stop sinning. There's a very practical outcome to believing in the power of resurrection. It should change the way we behave in this life. Paul says in v 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." (1 Cor. 15:34)**

If we serve a risen Lord we need to be doing his business in this world – telling others, and stopping sinning ourselves.

In verses 35 through 58 Paul explains

### **III. The Resurrection of the Body**

Those of you listening today span several decades in age. If you're young, death is not on your mind. But it's out there, looming. Some of you will lose parents, husbands or children that you love in the future. Everyone will lose someone. And some of us will die sooner than we wish, by illness or accident. So even though we often try not to think about death, we need to look at it today because this 15<sup>th</sup> chapter is both inspiring and reassuring.

I can say that because the words of this chapter carried me through the death of our 16 month old daughter. I could not have gone on without clinging to the truth of the resurrection, without knowing that Kirstie is growing up in heaven. And as others I loved died I take increasing joy in knowing they are together there and will greet me when I leave this

earth. I can see that as one gets older there is more and more to draw us to heaven, and less and less keeping us tethered to earth.

Recently John and I updated our will, something we hadn't done since 1995. Throughout the process we had to talk a lot to our three children about their various roles as executors and so on. Finally one of them said to me, "Mom, I'm glad to know all that, but can we stop talking about it now? I never want to hear about this again until I have to."

Maybe that's how we should approach these verses. Maybe we don't need them right now. But trust me, you will need these words of life one day when you are standing over the lifeless body of someone you love. For there is nothing deader than a dead body. It is shocking in its lifelessness. I have embraced and prayed over the bodies of friends and loved ones. To see a familiar body when the life has ebbed away is a very stark reminder of how death cannot be reversed or canceled out – except in Christ Jesus. So this chapter contains very great hope.

So the Corinthians wanted to know

#### **A. How?**

In verse 35 Paul begins to answer questions. How does our resurrection happen? What kind of body will we have? So he gives examples from nature. First, there are seeds. From this acorn, a giant oak grows. In verse 37 he writes, "**When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.**" (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:38). What goes into the ground has to die, and rot, and from it new life springs – usually a life that looks very different from the seed that went into the ground.

Then he gives another example. In verse 39 Paul says "**Not all flesh is the same. People have one kind of flesh, animals have another.**" (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:39). He uses examples from Genesis – there are heavenly bodies, like stars and planets, and earthly bodies. A caterpillar is attractive in its own way, but it becomes an even more beautiful butterfly. Yet the caterpillar contains the substance of the butterfly before it transforms. Human flesh is the same. An embryo is incapable of life, but a baby grows, is delivered, and takes its place in the world. We are constantly changing. That baby Jennie in the picture will look very different in ten or twenty years' time. And we expect that to happen. It's the normal pattern of things.

So it happens with the dead. They are sown in dishonor, with corruptible flesh that disappears eventually to dust. But those corruptible bodies are raised in glory. "**So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, 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.**" (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:42-44).

Just think of the hope this contains for all of us who lose the people we love to death. We read this verse over Kirstie's open coffin- her tiny, familiar 16 month old body horribly transformed into a shell of the lively person she was before death took her. Her head was misshapen from the fall that killed her. And yet the precious materials of that body will be transformed into a body of power, of maturity, of glory. We will see her again. She will be different, but she will never again have to suffer death or illness or decay.

Paul explains how this happens:

**“The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:47-49)**

All of us from Adam onward are made of the dust of the earth. But because of Christ that earthly dust, our DNA and molecules, will bear the image of Jesus when we receive our heavenly, resurrected body.

But

### **B. When?**

Naturally the Corinthians wanted to know when to expect this. In these verses, 50 through 57, Paul goes on to tell us a mystery. This came to Paul through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but we have another clue given to us in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:1-6, where Paul refers to the fact that he was caught up to heaven. He is deliberately vague about this experience but it may be the source of the words he gives us in 1 Corinthians 15.

So Paul writes, **“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:51)**

Paul knew that Jesus' return could happen at any moment, and when it did, Christians on earth would not suffer death but would be instantly transformed into their resurrection bodies. So here it might be helpful to recap what we know, and what we don't know:

### **What we know and what we don't know about resurrection**

#### ***What We Know***

**Transformed body (v. 42)**

**From dust of earth (v. 48)**

**Changes at Jesus' return (v. 52)**

**Death is defeated, but still happens (v. 54-55)**

#### ***What We Don't Know***

**What that body looks like**

**From material of heaven**

**Only God knows when Jesus returns**

**We don't know timing of Jesus' return**

If we consider Paul's words carefully we can see that he believed that Christians do not receive their imperishable resurrection body until Jesus returns. So what happens to people who have died and are waiting? Paul suggests that they have a spiritual body and are waiting for that trumpet call for the final transformation. But wait a minute...what about our belief that when Christians die, they instantly go to be with the Lord? That is true. Paul himself describes that in Philippians 1 when he says, “I desire to depart and be with Christ...” (Phil. 1:23). When Jesus was transfigured in Matthew 17 three disciples saw him meeting with Moses and Elijah. These two men were recognizable, which seems to argue against only having a spiritual body while waiting for Christ's return. But the most compelling example is what Jesus said to the dying thief on the cross: “Truly I tell you, **today** you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43).

So perhaps the best way to think about this is to understand what we know. We will have a transformed body, and it will be in some way made out of or linked to our present physical

body, because others will be able to recognize us. It doesn't matter if we are cremated, buried or blown to bits in a bomb. God, who made humankind from the dust of the earth, will recreate us. Those bodies will be transformed, not so much by being made from a new material but by being animated by the Holy Spirit instead of by a heart and lungs and internal organs. Therefore they will not be subject to disease or death. They will be suited to eternal life, not earthly life. But we are not exactly sure when this will happen, because none of us knows when Jesus will return. But what we do cling to is Jesus' promise that "today, you will be with me in Paradise". And that is a comforting thought.

**So here's**

**C. What it means for believers**

**First,**

**1. We are together with those we love in Christ.**

There is an incredibly deep tie between us and the physical bodies of the people we love. We have touched them, kissed them, smelt their familiar smells, heard their voices . I've witnessed the extremely poignant sight of spouses repeatedly caressing their dying loved one's hands, face, bodies even as they knew they were slipping away. We cannot help but touch the people we love. But what makes that touch so powerful is that it connects us to their warm and living body. When my mother died I helped wash her body and prepare her for burial. This is an age old tradition that allows us to honor the body of someone we love very greatly by preparing it to look as they would have wished – in clean clothes and combed hair, arranging their limbs in a position of comfort after the hard passage of death. After we prepared her for burial I sat for an hour alone in the bedroom with her with both hands tucked under her still warm back. Her extremities cooled but I kept my hands where life still seemed to linger, and I cried all the tears I had been holding back for weeks. Holding her cooling body helped me say goodbye, because the harshest thing about death is that it removes us from the presence of people we love.

So that is why this news is so very joyful. All of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15 are addressed to "we". We are not resurrected in solitary splendor. **We are together** with the people of God and that means the people we love in the Lord.

**2. We are together with the Lord**

But what's really important is that we will be with the Lord. And, hard as it is for us to grasp, that will actually be far more important than being with our loved ones. The Jesus we loved on earth will fill our senses in heaven like no human person can. He will be all to us, and we will worship and have joy in his presence forever.

But notice Paul says "we". Part of the joy of this experience will be the corporate nature of all of us together worshiping God. If you've ever had a transcendent experience of worship in church, then you will understand how powerful this will be. All the sin, hurt feelings and competition that divides us on this earth will be gone, and we will be together with others in perfect unity, all looking at Jesus. It's a powerful thought, the unity we have in resurrection.

That's what it means for believers. But here is

**D. What it means for me**

Look at verse 54:

**“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:54-57)**

The sting of death is sin, which brought humanity under the curse of death. Physical death is the penalty for sin, but its far worse effect is to separate us from God, which is where we'd be without Christ. It is no surprise that Christ's death would **“...free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:15)** As far as I can tell, that is almost all of us. We fear the pain and the unknown of death. We fear the disease that takes us through that door of death. But we do not have to fear being dead, because being absent from this body means that we are present with the Lord. So this has two effects.

First,

### **1. I don't have to fear separation.**

**“I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:50-52)**

**We** will all be changed. We will not be separated from those we love in Christ. Paul described it in another way in Thessalonians:

**“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thess. 4:16-17)**

I don't have to fear separation and judgment from God, because Christ has spoken for me. And I don't have to fear separation from those I love, because they are with Christ too.

But there's a more important message.

And that is:

### **2. What I do with my body in this life matters : Stand firm and serve.**

This chapter explains why the physical body is important. It is the means by which we carry out of the will of God when we are alive. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit in us. It is the basis for our new, resurrected body, which will be free of all the effects of sin and made like the unfallen bodies of Adam and Eve in the first chapter of Genesis. So that means our bodies are important in this life. We can't ignore or mistreat them. We should care about looking after them. Because Paul ends this chapter by writing some practical advice:

**“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Cor. 15:58)**

It is not in vain because Jesus' resurrection means that our resurrection is coming.

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