

Lessons from Corinth

“The Resurrection - Is It Really *That* Important?”

Part 9:1 Corinthians 15

The theological term “eschatology” has to do with the “final things.” It is the study of what happens when the end happens – final judgment, heaven, hell, etc. Lumped into this category are discussions about “end time” events and the second coming of Jesus. Perhaps one of the most important things about the end of all things is one of the most neglected. It tends to get lost and overshadowed in lesser discussions, overlooked in all the trivial minutia of “pre, mid or post trib.”¹

What is this truth that is so important and yet neglected? It is so central and significant that without it we are *lost* (1 Cor. 15:12-19). It is **the resurrection of the dead**. So little is taught about it; however, once we come to see it, it forever changes the way we understand the future, *our* future and *our* destiny.²

If we ask a typical Christian about what is to be the “end goal” of things, they would instantly say “heaven.” And by heaven, they would most likely mean a disembodied existence where one’s spirit lives in a timeless place. It might be shock for some that the idea of a timeless *disembodied* existence finds its origins in Greek thought and not in Scripture. This very passage, 1 Cor. 15, addresses a Corinthian error: the denial of a *bodily* resurrection. Whatever the particulars of our future existence, one thing is certain; we will be living in a body.³

15:1-11. The gospel Paul preached and in which he encouraged believers to stand has as its centerpiece *resurrection*. The fact of Jesus’ resurrection cannot be separated from His death for our sins; in fact, Paul says that *without* this resurrection we are still dead in our sins! Often our thinking about the gospel and our presentation of it focuses solely on the cross. We hardly give the resurrection a passing mention, if that. Not so for Paul.

5:12-19. The Corinthians must again wrestle with their false ways of thinking. Their Greek shaped worldview saw the afterlife in terms of an *escape* from the body; the goal of true “spirituality” was a disembodied existence. For them, the thought of living eternally with a body was disgusting.⁴ This was the prevailing view in the pagan world; the Jews alone were exceptional in holding to a bodily resurrection.⁵

For Paul, not only has Jesus been resurrected, but the fact of it makes our faith effective. Not that the cross is unimportant (obviously), but the resurrection is the vindication, the proof of Jesus’ claims and of His crown-rights as King (Rom. 1:4. 1 Cor. 15:20-28).

15:20-28. Jesus’ resurrection (and ascension/enthronement) establishes Him as Lord; and He will rule as Lord until every enemy is vanquished – last, but not least, *death*. Jesus is the first evidence (first fruits) of the reality that we, too, will be resurrected. His resurrection victory over death means more than something about our future existence; it means we can experience His something of His resurrection life now.⁶

15:35-49. Paul addresses the important question of what this will look like.

Understand that resurrection is not resuscitation. We are not talking about the same thing as when people were raised from the dead in the Bible. When Peter prayed for Dorcas (Acts 9) and she came back to life, she was *not* resurrected; her existing body simply (!) returned to the same state it was in before she died – except now she was well and whole. It didn’t *change*.

We might be confused by the terms “natural” and “spiritual.” What Paul does *not* mean is that our new bodies will be “non-corporeal” or “ghost-like.” Rather, our new body will not perish or decay; it will be animated by the very life of the Spirit and it will bear the stamp, the imprint, of heaven come to earth.⁷ It will be changed, transformed from what it now is to what it needs to be so that we can fully embrace and live in the new age and the final restoration and renewal of all things.⁸ And when that moment comes with His return, death will once and for all be vanquished and the loving redemptive purposes of God will be finally and fully brought about, “the beginning of the beginning” will begin!

How should all of this impact us? The implications of the resurrection are to be surprisingly “this worldly.” Because resurrection is the guarantee of that the creation will be renewed, it gives meaning to what we do in the here and now. It gives value to the creation because God will not abandon it or set it aside, rather He will transform it.

Some might be shocked to consider that “heaven” is not their final destination! Actually, it is *heaven come to earth*, the arrival of the King in His majestic transforming power, that awaits us. Whether from death we arise or we are alive at His return – we will join Him “in the air” as part of His royal escort when He comes to shoulder His earthly reign in its fullness.⁹

Because God will redeem, *not* abandon this world; we are to live in the present age with the scent of heaven on us. We are to be those who value this present world in confident expectation that Jesus will come to it and bring to fulfillment to all of our obedient efforts to see His kingdom come in the here and now.

This is no utopianism; it is hope-filled realism. The reality of the *coming* kingdom reaches back into our present with its power to change things *now*. Jesus’ resurrection is proof that the power of His kingdom is *now* at work; He sits *now* on His throne after all!¹⁰

Jesus lives! The *resurrected* Jesus lives! And because He does Paul says that what we do *now* matters:

“For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. ‘O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. **Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain in the Lord.***” 1 Cor. 15:53-58 NAU (emphasis mine)

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¹ Tribulation discussions, by the way, have little to do with anything important, eschatologically speaking. In fact, the most reasonable position, in my mind, sees the “great tribulation” as already in the past – the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It’s OK, no guilt, go ahead and throw away all those “end times” charts. ☺

² I would suggest N. T. Wright’s book, *Surprised by Hope, Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008). Wright is a well-known, respected Anglican clergyman, scholar and author.

³ Interestingly, Revelation paints the picture of the end as being that of a *new* heavens and *new* earth. Apparently, God is committed to redeeming the creation fully and finally in the end (Rev. 21-22, Rom. 8).

⁴ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 715.

⁵ Which is another reason why it is so radical; yet a fitting end to the story, “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.” N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, 1 Corinthians*, 205.

⁶ It is again, the “already and not yet” of the kingdom. We already “feel” the presence of His life in ours’ – but we await the final consummation when all things will be put right by Him. We “groan,” says Paul, in anticipation – and so does the whole creation! Rom. 8.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, 1 Corinthians*, 221.

⁸ Phil. 4:20-21. Interesting – “we eagerly await” for Him. To do what? Come and transform us! The citizenship metaphor would have been clear to the Philippians – they lived on earth, but their allegiance was to the One who lived in heaven. Their life together in the present made them an “outpost” of their King and His kingdom in a foreign land awaiting Him to come and take up His reign *there* and change everything. No escapism here.

⁹ While much is made of a “rapture,” there is much to consider. In fact, the way it is often presented not only blurs the true significance of what Paul is saying, it runs contrary. The metaphor which stands behind Paul’s idea in 1 Thess. 4:1-18 is that of a king about to enter a city and being received by its citizens who have come outside of the city to escort him into the city. Notice that He “descends” (1 Thess. 4:16) – He comes to stay! And it is quite noisy – no secret escape here! Also, see Rev. 21-22: the new Jerusalem “comes down” to earth, not vice versa.

¹⁰ Acts 2:32-36.