

1 Corinthians Chapter 15

It is impossible to exaggerate the value of the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians. It is not only that it throws not otherwise obtainable by us in so full a form on the state to which the resurrection will introduce us, but it supplies a pledge of that resurrection that cannot in the least be weakened by any just method of criticism. It furnishes an absolute demonstration of Christ having risen from the dead so far as evidence can establish such a thing. That evidence can prove things we have not seen is a matter of everyday experience in a thousand matters. How do we know what is going on in the “far East” and on the Nile but by evidence? Have we any doubt that British ironclads and British soldiers are at work in these two fields of action because we have not seen them? How do we know that England conquered India and Canada but by evidence? Our whole knowledge of the past rests on evidence, and it is not any the less certain on that account.

The evidence that Paul furnishes of Christ’s resurrection is far stronger than that on which we believe that Julius Caesar landed on the shores of England B.C. 60. It is the evidence of eye-witnesses living while he wrote, completed by his own evidence, which was also that of an eye-witness.

What led him to introduce it is interesting to consider. It was the state of things among the believers at Corinth. This community had been established by the labours of Paul about sixteen years previously. In the interval, many disorders had risen among them. It must appear natural that it should be so when we consider that the existence of an ecclesia or church among Gentiles was a new thing—especially when we realise that it was composed of men and women who had been philosophers and idolaters, and whose ideas would be liable to stick to them. Paul had heard of disorders among them—divisions, factions, philosophic contentions, vagaries about marriage, irregularities in the observance of the memorial supper, even hostility to Christ and denial of the resurrection. But the thing that principally stirred him up to write was apparently the receipt of a letter from the leading brethren, who were anxious about the state of things. They had asked his mind specifically on a variety of points, as we gather from the first verse of the 7th chapter (“*Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me*”). It was doubtless an arrangement of the Providence of God that these disorders should be brought under Paul’s notice, for the result was to give all generations of believers afterwards clear guidance on a number of important matters. It may seem strange that such disorders should arise in a community guided by men possessed of the gifts of the Spirit (chapters 12 & 14). But our wonder may cease if we remember that these gifts were subject to the volition of their possessors (1 Cor. 14:32), and that tongues, &c., were for a sign to unbelievers (verse 22), that is, a divine confirmation of the Gospel as furnishing a basis for faith (Heb. 2:4; Mark 16:20). Brethren with wrong ideas on the matters that had arisen would have these gifts as well as brethren with right ideas, so that there would be uncertainty of guidance except by the exercise of that “understanding” which Paul presses so strongly on their attention in verse 20. Hence the reference by letter to Paul, to whom they were prepared to accord the authority which he claims when he says,

“*The things that I write are the commandments of the Lord*” (verse 37).

Having disposed of various preliminary matters—faction (1:11; 2:3), philosophy (2:14), fornication (5:1, 11), going to law (6:1-7), the married state (7:1-17), idolatry (8:4), apostolic rights (9:4), the breaking of bread (11:17-34), the use of spiritual gifts (12:7-27), &c., he then addresses himself to the subject of resurrection in the chapter before us. He does not drop right on to it, but makes a skilful detour by way of catching the objectors on their own ground, as it were. This ground was—membership of the Corinthian ecclesia. How had they become members of the Corinthian ecclesia? By Paul’s preaching, for saith he,

“So we preach, and so ye believed” (verse 11).

What was this Gospel? He says,

“I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye received, and wherein ye stand, and by which also ye are saved if ye keep in memory,” &c.

This was splendid strategy. How could they consistently object to the Gospel that had drawn them out of idolatry and given them their present position? Well, what was it? He does not declare the whole Gospel, but only a particular part. He says nothing about the kingdom, although the Gospel he preached was the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). He says nothing about the judgment of the living and the dead at the appearing of Christ, though that he identifies as an element of his Gospel in another place (Rom. 2:16). He says nothing about the promises made to Abraham, though he elsewhere calls them the Gospel (Gal. 3:8). Why not? The reason is plain. He is going to use the Gospel in argument against certain who denied the resurrection: consequently he only reminds them of that part of the Gospel that bore upon that question. This is wise. What man in arguing about any matter would cumber himself with those parts of the subject not in question? So Paul fixes at once on the resurrection part of the Gospel:

“I delivered unto you first of all (or “among the first things,” which is a more accurate translation of en protois) *how that CHRIST DIED for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he ROSE AGAIN.”*

But Paul did more than tell the Corinthians that Christ rose. He reminded them of evidence upon which the fact had been received:

“He was seen of Cephas (Peter), then of the twelve; after that, he was seen of about 500 brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep; after that, he was seen of James, then of all the apostles.”

This is in a particular form, what he said at Antioch in Pisidia, as reported in Acts 13:31:

*“He was **seen many days** of them which came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are **his witnesses unto the people.**”*

But Paul adds greatly to the strength of this testimony when he proceeds, in 1 Cor. 15, to say:

*“Last of all he was **seen of me also**, as one born out of due time.”*

As he exclaims in the 9th chapter:

*“Have I not **SEEN** Jesus Christ our Lord?”*

Let us consider for a moment the strength of this testimony. First, it is a writing direct from Paul. We may be as certain of this as if we had seen him write it, for it has been in the hands of the Christian community since the very first century, as proved by the concurrent recognition of all writings since, and particularly by the letter of Clement, of Rome, in the first century, to the Corinthians themselves, whom Clement implores to consult Paul’s own letter in support of what he is saying. A letter recognised without contradiction in the first century as Paul’s letter, must have been Paul’s letter, for it is not possible that any other than Paul’s letter could have obtained such a recognition, especially a letter addressed to a community of many persons like the Corinthian ecclesia, who were so many checks against the circulation of a false letter had such been attempted, and so may guarantee of the genuine when sent abroad.

Secondly, it is the testimony of witnesses at first hand. It is no report of rumor or mere avowal of conviction as to Christ’s resurrection. A man’s conviction might be no evidence, unless it could be shown the conviction was well founded; but a man telling us what he has seen is a different affair altogether. Paul names the witnesses. By means of this letter, we are in as good a position as regards having evidence of Christ’s resurrection as if we were transported back to the first century and into the presence of the various persons mentioned by Paul:

“He was seen of Cephias (Peter).”

Paul spent over a whole fortnight with Peter (Gal. 1:18), and we may be sure had much conversation on this matter, of such common engrossment to them both.

“Then of the twelve.”

Of this, Paul would hear from Peter and James, whom he met on the same occasion, and also from others casually who would know.

*“After that, he was seen of above 500 brethren at once, of whom **the greater part remain unto this present**, but some are fallen asleep.”*

Here again is a large body of living witnesses, with many of whom Paul as a travelling apostle would have many opportunities of contact.

“After that, he was seen of James.”

Paul saw James at Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19), and therefore would hear from him personally of what he, James had seen, *“then of all the apostles,”* of which he would also hear from Peter and James.

“Last of all, he was seen of ME ALSO.”

This crowns the pile of testimony—the testimony of **personal witnesses**. Paul does not here tell us when and under what circumstances he saw Christ, but he does elsewhere: in his published speeches (Acts 22 and 26) which are confirmed by the writer of the Acts in his account (chapter 9). These circumstances were such as to afford the utmost guarantee that the occurrence was an actual one and not an affair of hallucination, for it was in the day-light, at noon, and in the presence of neutral witnesses—Paul’s legal escort and officers, who all saw what happened and were thrown to the ground by it; and finally it left physical effects on Paul, for when he rose from the ground he was blind, and had to be led into Damascus by those of whom he had come as the leader. The thing, as Paul said before Agrippa, *“was not done in a corner.”* It was done in the public eye so far as accessory circumstances were concerned.

Hence, this rehearsal, when logically construed, is absolute proof of Christ’s resurrection. Having laid this impregnable foundation, Paul at once attacks the unbelief in resurrection that had grown up among the Corinthians. He advances with great power,

“Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?”

He as much as says, If there is no resurrection in the abstract, of course Christ has not risen; but I have proved that he has risen. Therefore “I have proved you wrong at the start.” And I appeal to my own course of life—well known to you—in support of my contention.

*“To this present hour, we both hunger and thirst, and are naked and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place . . . and are as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things unto this day (chap. 4:11-13).
What advantageth it me all this, if the dead rise not”
(15:19, 32).*

“If Christ be not raised, then is our preaching vain and your faith (for even the objectors believed in their way, estimating Christ as one of the gods) is also vain.”

“But now is CHRIST RISEN from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept: for since by man (Adam) came death, by man (Christ) came also the resurrection of the dead.”

This gives a large and personal bearing to the fact of Christ’s resurrection. It was not merely an extraordinary episode or incident by itself, but an event having a world-wide interest for the race—the establishment of a new hope for the children of death—subject to the conditions disclosed.

“Every man in his own order: Christ, the first-fruits, afterwards they that are Christ’s at his coming; then (at) the end when he shall have delivered up the Kingdom to God.” “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

Having placed the whole subject on this triumphant foundation, he then turns on the Corinthian doubters. *“Be not deceived: ‘evil communications corrupt good manners’* (a quotation, this last, from one of their own poets, and therefore apposite to them as leaners towards the wisdom of this world). *Awake to righteousness and sin not, for some have not the knowledge of God”* (here he suggests that wrong doctrine is sin: that a reception of the truth is righteousness—a sentiment very foreign to the so-called Christianity of our day, which deprecates doctrine as a matter both of uncertainty and insignificance). *“I speak this to your shame.”* Certainly, it is a disgrace to a man not to know the truth when heaven’s messengers have been here to make it known. It was a shame to the Corinthians, with Paul the apostle within reach, to be so lacking in understanding, and it is a shame to Britons, with Paul’s epistle in their hands, to be similarly lacking.

“But” (with a compassionate glance at the sincere philosophic difficulties of some of the doubters) *“some man will say, How are the dead raised up?”* They are buried in the ground; they are dissolved; their substance is absorbed by other organisms, vegetable and animal. How is it possible for a living body having once parted with its life to live again? What is Paul’s answer? First, he reminds them that in the realm of nature, it is a common occurrence for life to come out of death.

“That which thou sowest, is not quickened except it die.”

This is well known. A seed sown in the ground is unproductive if it retain its vitality. It must **die** to germinate and give a new plant. It is what Jesus said:

*“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground **and die**, it abideth alone”* (John 10:24).

Our hypercritics pounce upon this, and declare it untrue to science. They say if a seed is dead, it will not germinate. True; what then? A dead seed cannot die. Jesus did not mean a dead seed; Paul did not mean a dead seed. They both meant a living seed, and what they said cannot be impugned. If this living seed die not when sown, there will be no sprouting for a new plant. *“But even then,”* say they, *“it but enters on a new form of life.”* What? come into the field a new-sprouted grain? Pull up one of those plants by the root: behold the husk of the original seed attached to the root: is that living or dead? Dead undoubtedly, as dead as the most withered leaf you can pick from the roadside. *“Ah, yes, it is dead now,”* says our unappeasable friend, *“but its life is in the new plant.”* Who said it was not? The point is, its life is gone; the seed is dead, and if it had not died, there would have been no new plant. Our friend shakes his head. Come, now, tell us what is death? Give us your definition. It is not a mere transfer of life? Can you destroy life? You know you cannot. You know that all scientific investigation shows that though death is the destruction of the form of life for the time being, whether in plant or animal, insect or human being, the life-principle itself is but given up: it cannot be destroyed (This is not immortality of the creature, you know, but immortality of the Creator, which is a different thing). This being the case, tell me what is the death of a seed? Is it not the transfer of its life, either to the atmosphere or a new organism? Of course it is. Where is your objection, then, about the seed not dying? Dying and transferring life (where the life is wholly transferred) are but different modes of describing the same thing, so that your objection is a mere juggle of words.

Paul does not mean to say that the dead will rise upon the same principle that a seed-grain sprouts a plant, because a dead body does not take with it into the earth any power or organism of self-germination. Resurrection bodies don't grow from corpses in the churchyard or cemetery. What he means to say is this, that if death leading to life is a daily occurrence in the field, there ought to be no philosophic difficulty about the possibility of such a thing in another department, subject to its own peculiar laws, where its operation is proved, as by the resurrection of Christ. There is force in the argument. A reasonable mind will say that if God can cause a seed to reproduce its kind, He can easily bring about the reproduction of a man who may have died, if He please. It is only a different application of the same power. The first is seen as one of nature's actual ordinances. The second is seen by reason as a thing coming out of facts accomplished and purposes revealed. The "how" will not trouble men who are not fools. We cannot understand the "how" in the sprouting grain, yet we doubt not, because we can see. Why, therefore, should the "how" in the resurrection of dead men trouble us because the process is beyond our ken?

"Ah, but that is not all," says our friend again: "it is not merely the mystery of the process; it is the impossibility of it in view of the scattering of our substance and its absorption in other forms of life and other men." How very clever our friend appears to be, but how truly shallow. Of all forms of shallowness the clever sorts are the most odious—especially when, as in this case, it lifts its sacrilegious hands against manifest truth. This objection to resurrection on the score of the stuff we take with us into the grave, is really contemptible. Why, my friend, where are your last year's dinners? A pretty heap they would make. Are you less yourself because the stuff that was in you before you got those dinners has got dispersed? The stuff that keeps you going at this moment as you wag your foolish tongue, will be all gone if you live a few years longer; will you be less yourself on that account? Be wise, and take an honest think. If identity of stuff is so much a matter of indifference during your insignificant life, why do you imagine it becomes so vastly indispensable when it is an affair of making you over again? The thing that is essential to identify is not any particular stuff, but the particular impressions on the brain that constitute our memories. God has those impressions in the storehouse of His infinite memory, and if He choose to write them on a new brain, you will find yourself to be yourself as much as if He hunted creation round to collect the identical atoms that you took with you into the grave. Enough on that.

And now for the Corinthian doubters' further questions:

"With (or to) what body do they come?"

As much as to say, "If they come back with the bodies they have now, they will not be immortal, and how then about everlasting life? And if they come back with another sort of body, they will not be themselves." Paul's answer is as if he had said, "There is no need why the resurrected dead should have the identical flesh of mortal experience. There are various kinds of flesh in the universe, and various kinds of body and glory. God is not beholden to any particular sort in the rebuilding of His people.

"The glory of the terrestrial is one, and the glory of the celestial is another."

“Ah yes,” it may be said, “but resurrection is **resurrection**—standing again; and if the dead are to come forth in another order of nature, it loses its character as resurrection.” Paul is ready with the answer: “Yes, if they were to come forth in a new nature; but they are not to do this;

‘We shall be changed, and this mortal shall put on immortality.’”

Do you not see that is how it is with your grain?

“You sow, not that body that shall be (ultimately), but bare grain, it may chance of wheat or some other grain, but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him, and to every seed his own body.”

When grain has been sown, the body projected above ground at first is not that body that shall be, but a tiny green leaf, out of which slowly comes the stalk, and then the ear—which slowly ripens until it is ready for the sickle. There is a process in the raising of ripe grain from the sown seed.

“So also is the resurrection of the dead; it is sown a natural body: it is raised a spiritual body; it is sown in corruption: it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in weakness: it is raised in power; it is sown in dishonour: it is raised in glory.”

This raising of the dead into glory, power, and incorruption, is no more an instantaneous thing than the raising of sown grain into spring wheat. When the dead re-formed resume life, they are the mortal men and women that toiled through the experience of probation. The process of their perfecting includes their gathering together for a meeting with Christ, their rendering an account to him for judgment, their change (if accepted) into the incorruptible—all together, “*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.*” Many read the statement “*raised a spiritual body, raised in incorruption,*” &c., as if there were no judgment, and as if the dead were immortal the moment they emerge from the ground. This comes of a partial reading of the Scriptures, or, in this case, from a defective study of the analogy of sown grain, on which the statements in question are based. Paul is much given to ellipsis in his utterances of truth. He jumps over detail when it is the upshot of a matter he is anxious to bring into view. Thus in this very chapter, in contrasting the two Adams, he appears to leave out of account the whole mortal life of Jesus.

“The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven.”

No one would know from this if he did not know otherwise, that the Lord Jesus also, in the first stage of his being, was a living soul, of the earth, earthy, as much as Adam. That was only part of the process of his development as the now ever-living and powerful quickening Lord in heaven; and Paul leaves out the process in his desire to show the finished result. So with the resurrection: he leaves out the process and would even appear to assume that there are no rejected ones at the resurrection “*who shall not see life.*” He speaks only of the accepted, and only of the upshot of the resurrection in the attainment of glory, power, and immortality.

Thus Paul wholly meets the objections of unbelief with regard to the resurrection. He proves the resurrection of Christ, and by consequence the resurrection by-and-bye of all his people. What a sublime fact is this on which to rest in the midst of all the disappointing mutabilities of this mortal life; and what a consoling prospect to have in the midst of all the clouds and shadows and heart-breaks of this afflicted life. What greater inducement could we have to that patent conformity to the will of God to which the Gospel invites? What more fitting exhortation than the one with which Paul concludes his whole argument:

*“Wherefore 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.”*

Robert Roberts, 1898