

1. Paul regarded resurrection to be the essence of the gospel, a fact made plain by his introduction to the topic (15:1-11). For he opened his treatment by discussing the gospel and the critical fact that denying the truth of resurrection (even if only with respect to the saints) amounts to a denial of the gospel itself and so also one's own faith.
 - a. In making his case, the first thing Paul did was remind the Corinthians that they *knew* this gospel of resurrection. (His declaration "I make known to you" has the sense of "I call your attention to.") And Paul could make this assertion with all confidence because he himself had brought the gospel to them. He knew what the Corinthians had heard and understood concerning Jesus Christ because he had been their teacher and father in the faith (ref. 4:15). Moreover, he reminded them that the gospel he'd preached to them didn't originate with him; he'd received it just as they had. But in his case, he'd received it, not from other men – not even from the Twelve, but from Jesus Himself (Galatians 1:11-17). He stood unique among those whom Jesus had called, for his calling and apostleship came after Jesus' ascension and following a season in which he had persecuted the Lord and His Church. In terms of his apostleship, Paul regarded himself as one "untimely born" (15:8-10), and yet he knew the veracity of his calling and gospel, for they had come to him from the One who set him apart from his mother's womb.

Paul's gospel was Jesus' gospel (further authenticated by the Twelve – Galatians 2:1-9), and this gospel has its climactic focal point in Jesus' resurrection from the dead (15:3-4). This was the gospel Paul imparted to the Corinthians and they had *believed* it to be true and *embraced* it in faith. And having believed it, they had heretofore *stood fast* in it without wavering (15:1). How was it, then, that they were now stumbling by questioning the truth of resurrection?

Indeed, Paul's words suggest that he wanted the Corinthians to see that there was a striking irony in their situation: They had embraced and held fast to Paul's gospel because they believed, as he did, that, in Jesus Christ whom the gospel proclaims, life and immortality have been brought to light (2 Timothy 2:8-10). *But that life is precisely bound up in the truth of resurrection which they were now struggling with.* They couldn't have it both ways; either they would come to grips with and fully embrace the reality of resurrection or be guilty of denying the truth of new life in Jesus. Questioning the truth of resurrection amounts to questioning the very essence of what it means to be a Christian; in effect, these Corinthians were calling into question their own identity as new men in Christ.

At bottom, denying the truth of resurrection amounts to denying the gospel itself, which is the good news of new creation in Jesus Christ. Paul understood the vast and grave implications of Jesus' resurrection, and the fact that some at Corinth were struggling with the very notion of resurrection indicated to him that they didn't share his insight; it told him that either they had lost sight of what he'd taught them or they hadn't done due diligence with his gospel in the first place (15:2). (The rendering, "believed in vain," is potentially misleading; here the phrase has the sense of believing thoughtlessly or without proper consideration.)

- b. Paul had preached the gospel of resurrection to the Corinthians, but he hadn't been alone in that work. New creation in Jesus is the message of the gospel and He was the first to proclaim it. He did so at first by pointing forward to His death and resurrection, and then afterward as He spent forty days with His disciples explaining to them the meaning and significance of what had occurred (cf. Luke 24:13-51; Acts 1:1-8). Jesus attested to the gospel of resurrection in His person and work, but as the One in whom all the Scriptures are fulfilled; *Jesus' witness to the gospel was preceded by and accorded with the witness of the Scriptures themselves* (15:3-4). In His person, words and works, Jesus affirmed the truthfulness of the Scriptures and showed that the promise of the kingdom they proclaim was now being fulfilled in Him (cf. Mark 1:14-15 with Matthew 4:12-23, 12:1-28; Mark 9:1-13, 11:1-10, 12:18-37; John 3:1-6; etc.). Thus, in preaching his gospel, Paul was merely a co-laborer with the Lord and the Scriptures.

So also Paul was part of a larger band of men carrying the same message. Again, though Paul received his gospel from Jesus Himself apart from any input from the other apostles, he'd later set it before the Twelve out of concern that perhaps he'd misunderstood or was misapplying what Jesus taught him. And those men affirmed Paul's gospel; like him, they proclaimed the risen Lord and forgiveness and new life in Him, asserting as Paul did (and Jesus before him – cf. Luke 24:44-46 with Matthew 16:21), that Jesus' death and resurrection were a matter of scriptural fulfillment (Acts 2:14-32, 13:26-37, 17:1-3).

- c. The Scriptures held forth the hope of resurrection, situating its realization and fruition in the person and work of Yahweh's Servant-Messiah. And what the Scriptures promised has now been realized in Jesus of Nazareth – a fact verified by many witnesses. If the Scriptures attested resurrection in promise, hundreds of people then attested it in person. Multitudes had personally seen the risen Christ, which was critical to authenticating the truth of His resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21-22, 3:12-15, 4:33, 13:30-31). Perhaps most significantly, more than five hundred persons had seen Him *at the same time*, many of whom were still alive at the time of Paul's letter (15:6). This fact virtually eliminated the possibility of either a conspiracy surrounding Jesus' resurrection or the claim that alleged sightings of Him were due to an over-active imagination. Moreover, many of these eyewitnesses were still available to verify what they had seen.

Among those who had seen the risen Lord, it's interesting that Paul specifically mentioned Peter and James (15:5, 7). There are at least two good reasons for this. The first is that these men were among those regarded as "pillars" in the early Church (Galatians 2:6-9). Peter had been commissioned by the Lord to lead and feed His sheep (John 21:15-17) and James was the Lord's own brother. Moreover, these men were leaders in the mother church in Jerusalem (ref. Acts 15:1-21, 21:17-18; Galatians 1:15-19). The fact that these prominent and very credible individuals claimed to have seen Jesus in His resurrection was hugely significant. Were any of the Corinthian saints really prepared to call into question the integrity of these apostolic leaders (not to mention the other apostles)?

But perhaps Paul's primary reason for mentioning Peter and James is that they were prime examples of the vital truth that Jesus' resurrection is *transformative*.

- Peter had struggled with the whole notion of Jesus' death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21-23; cf. Luke 18:31-34, 24:1-11; John 20:1-10) and then forsook and denied Him at the end. Thus Peter had to be *restored* (Luke 22:31-32), and Jesus accomplished this restoration in connection with His resurrection (cf. John 21:15-17 with Acts 1:1-2:40, 3:1-26, 4:1-12, etc.).
- So James, along with Jesus' other siblings, had disbelieved and likely resisted His messianic calling and work (cf. John 7:1-8 with Mark 3:20-21, 31-32 in which it appears Jesus' family had come together to convince Him to stop His activities which were attracting so much unwanted and awkward attention.) James saw Jesus as simply his older brother and so it's not unreasonable that he'd have found Jesus' claims and behavior irritating and embarrassing. At the very least, Jesus was an enigma to His family members. But the resurrection changed all that. The Scripture doesn't relate the specifics of James' conversion, but it does present a man who, following his brother's resurrection, was transformed from a confused doubter into a devoted servant of his Lord and His Church.

- d. Lastly, Paul reminded the Corinthians that *he*, too, was a witness to the risen Christ. They were doubtless aware of that fact; Paul surely would have emphasized it as part of his witness to Jesus in Corinth. He hadn't come to Corinth promoting a fantastic tale of an alleged rising from the dead, but proclaiming the gospel of resurrection and creational renewal as an eyewitness of the risen, exalted Messiah (15:8). Therefore those at Corinth who were questioning bodily resurrection were calling into question the testimony of the man who was their father in the faith. Did they understand that and did they perceive the implication? If Paul was wrong (or deceitful) respecting resurrection – which he claimed to have witnessed in Jesus, how could they entrust themselves to his gospel – the gospel which stands upon the truth of resurrection?

Paul was in fact a witness to Jesus' resurrection, but one not unlike Peter and James. That is, he was himself a poignant example of the truth that Jesus' resurrection brings about the transformation of human beings: *His life out of death is life out of death for men*. Indeed, Paul is arguably the most powerful example of this truth, and his reference to himself as "one untimely born" shows that he believed this about himself and had it in mind. For this Greek noun refers literally to a premature birth, whether through miscarriage or abortion. This imagery has led commentators in two distinct directions:

- The first highlights the issue of *untimeliness* and concludes that Paul was speaking of the lateness of his coming to faith and apostolic calling. He was "untimely born" in that he wasn't part of the Twelve, but the Lord had called and commissioned him well after His ascension.

- But the context perhaps better supports another emphasis. The birth scenario indicated by this Greek term does imply a kind of untimeliness in that the baby isn't carried to term. But the more important issue is that the baby is delivered *dead*; it issues from the womb prematurely because of miscarriage or abortion, not because of an early live birth. (This is the only occurrence of the noun in the New Testament, but it occurs three times in the Septuagint: Numbers 12:12, Job 3:16 and Ecclesiastes 6:3).

Recognizing the strangeness and seeming unsuitability of this metaphor (for example, Paul's "birth" into faith in Christ and apostleship came *late* relative to his counterparts, not prematurely), some have argued that Paul was describing himself in the manner of his detractors and opponents. Barrett's comments are representative of this view:

"It must be admitted that this word was an odd one to choose for this purpose, and it is probable that Paul took it up from the lips of his adversaries. It suggested the characteristics of an unformed, undeveloped, repulsive and possibly lifeless fetus. The word may even have been used not only of Paul's supposed deficiencies as a Christian and apostle, but also with reference to his bodily characteristics. 2 Corinthians 10:10 shows that his adversaries were not above mocking his physical appearance."

But there is another possibility: Set alongside his mention of Peter and James and then viewed through the lens of the larger context, Paul's terminology suggests that he was thinking of his own life-out-of-death transformation by virtue of Jesus' resurrection. If that event changed everything for Peter, James, and Jesus' other disciples, how much more was it true for Paul, the devout Pharisee and persecutor of Jesus and His "way"? Paul knew all too well what he had been prior to his "birth from above" (1 Timothy 1:12-13) and he knew what Jesus made him; there was no pretense in his self-assessment that he was one "abnormally born": He was indeed like an undeveloped baby delivered under the sentence of death, only to be revived and formed by a confrontation with the risen Lord of life.

Jesus' life out of death had become Paul's, and that by the gracious power and purpose of God who had been pleased to reveal His Son in him (15:9-10; cf. Galatians 1:15-16). Paul *knew* the truth of resurrection because he had witnessed it in Jesus Himself, but also because he had experienced it in his own rebirth in Damascus (Acts 9:1-19) and then in an ongoing way in the radical transformation of his life from a committed adversary of Christ and His Church to their devoted servant (cf. Acts 22:1-5, 26:1-23 and 2 Corinthians 4).

Paul understood that, in a very real way, *he* was living proof of the truth of resurrection; the Corinthians, being intimately familiar with his story and ministry, should have shared his self-perception (as also they ought to have regarded themselves). Even if they were too dull to perceive resurrection in the power of Paul's ministry, they should have been able to detect it in Paul's life.

For his undaunted and fervent devotion – at great cost to himself – was not consistent with a man endorsing an anecdote or secondhand account. Such zeal for Jesus and His gospel – especially as an abrupt and radical turnabout for a devout, dedicated Pharisee – could only result from a direct and transforming encounter with the living Lord Himself. Paul had had such an encounter with Jesus and, from that moment, nothing was ever the same for him; in every respect, he showed himself obedient to the heavenly vision (ref. again Acts 26:12-23).

- e. In calling the Corinthians' attention back to the gospel, Paul also rehearsed with them its *content* (15:3-4). But in doing so, he spoke in general, summary terms. That is, Paul wasn't in any way implying that the specific matters of the Lord's crucifixion, burial and resurrection constitute the fullness of the gospel (or that they were the sum total of his proclamation of it); rather, he highlighted these three issues as being "*of first importance*" (cf. 1:23).

It's worth noting that many perceive in Paul's language and grammar a sort of formulaic expression which suggests that he was citing the articles of an early creed or confession of faith within the Church. Given Paul's encompassing perspective on the Christ event, it's doubtful he ever treated the gospel in creedal terms. But even if this view is correct, it doesn't change the fact that he was here highlighting Jesus' death, burial and resurrection as key issues in his gospel, not limiting the gospel to those three events (as so many today are inclined to do).

And Paul highlighted these three as "of first importance" because he understood that, without them, there is no "good news" to proclaim. For Jesus was put to death, not on his own account, but on behalf of the human race whose nature He took to Himself ("for the sake of our sins"). He entered fully into human death – spiritual and physical ("He was buried") – in order to conquer death and recover life, not just for mankind, but for the whole creation. And Jesus was raised from the dead, not merely (or even primarily) as proof of His own sinlessness, for he died as "sin-bearer" as well as "spotless lamb." He died on behalf of Adam's race and the entire cursed creation, and so it was with His resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was His triumph over sin and death, but as the *Last Adam*: He is the first fruits from the dead and so has secured and inaugurated the creation's "life out of death" (cf. Romans 4:23-25, 6:1-11, 7:1-6, 8:9-11; also 1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 4:1-14; Ephesians 2:12-6; Colossians 2:8-14, 3:1-4).

And recognizing that Jesus' death and resurrection were grounded in and completed the work of His incarnation – that is, His becoming man for the sake of man, it is evident that, in both His sinlessness and death as sin-bearer, Jesus showed that He was in full agreement with His Father concerning man:

- In terms of Jesus' sinlessness, He agreed with His Father concerning of the truth of man as *image-son*. Jesus didn't comply with a list of divine directives; He lived as True Man: man in perfect conformity to the One whose image and likeness he bears; man as authentically human.

- And in terms of Jesus' death as sin-bearer, He agreed with His Father *against* man by virtue of what man had become. Jesus embraced in Himself that which man is in his estrangement from God (Mark 15:34) and what he deserves because of it, thereby affirming the truth of man's guilt and just condemnation – the truth of man's falseness. Ironically, in that way, too (that is, by standing with His Father in condemning pseudo-man – man as fallen and estranged), Jesus showed His agreement with His Father concerning what man is in truth – what man was created to be. By His life and by His death, Jesus embraced and displayed the truth of both God and man – man as false and man as true.

“The death of Jesus was an outworking of the incarnation of the judge in our humanity, but it was such an outworking of it, that it was in our human nature that the judge bore his own judgment. It was the full realization of the holy will of God in our human nature, the full meting out of the divine condemnation against sin, the full outpouring of the divine love into and upon human nature. But in Christ Jesus all that was also gladly suffered and endured for our sakes, so that in him there was achieved in judgment, in complete and final justification, a judgment, a union between God and humanity which death and hell itself could not break or in any way sunder. Nothing could isolate Jesus as man from God, not even the final judgment of God, for Jesus as man was God himself come as man. It is this perfect oneness in the midst of judgment, God's bearing in his own incarnation his own judgment of mankind, that is at once the ground of atonement and also its ultimate end. For it is in that oneness that the fellowship is created and restored between God and humanity and humanity and God, the fellowship which is the goal of all God's merciful work of redemption.”

(T. F. Torrance, Atonement)

Paul saw all of this bound up and authenticated in the truth of resurrection – the fact of life out of death. Paul insisted upon this gospel and unashamedly preached it to men (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). But he was not alone; he was part of a faithful apostolic community charged by the Lord with taking His gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul's message was the apostolic gospel – the good news of resurrection in Christ Jesus (cf. Acts 2:22-36, 3:12-26, 4:1-2, 23-33, 5:27-31, 10:34-42, 13:26-39, 17:16-18, 22-32, 23:1-6, 24:14-21, 26:22-23), and that was the gospel the Corinthians had heard and believed (15:11).

Thus the thrust of Paul's introduction to the matter of resurrection: Resurrection is the marrow of the gospel which the Corinthians had embraced and in which they had placed their hope. But even as their hope was set squarely on Jesus Christ, it was set on the truth that He is the Living One who has conquered death and hell and brought life and immortality to light. In a word, the Corinthians' hope was the hope of resurrection, and this meant that their hope needed to look toward a glorious future for their bodies, not their liberation from them. If the Corinthians indeed had a gospel faith and hope, they needed to stand firm in the Lord. And this meant holding fast to the truth of resurrection – their present resurrection into a heavenly abode and the fullness of their resurrection in the transformation of their bodies in the Day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:17-4:1).