



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 23: Let's Say For a Bit it Ain't So... 1 Corinthians 15:12-28

I want you to use your imagination for a moment or two this morning. People often say we Reformed Christians are not very imaginative but I would respond to that charge by saying, "That's ridiculous. The fact is we choose to bind our imaginations in worship is not because we are unimaginative but rather because we are too imaginative. We agree with Calvin that our hearts are idol factories and that we keep churning out little idols that just happen to look a lot like ourselves. So, we tend to rein in our imaginations and bind ourselves to Word and Sacrament in order to prevent ourselves from cruising the universe of our own misguided self-worship. In fact, whenever I think about this issue of whether or not we are imaginative I am reminded, almost immediately, of that scene in the *Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where the characters come to the island where all of a person's dreams are fulfilled and Reepicheep turns to the others in the little boat they're in and yells something to the effect of 'Turn about boys and row, row for your lives.' He does that because he knows just how capable we are at dreaming up really bad things and I think he had it right...especially when it comes to using our imaginations in worship and Bible

Study...still, I am going to risk it all and ask you to use your imagination this morning anyway."

Here's what I want you to imagine. I want you to imagine that you are on a platform high up in the air...since this is imaginary let's not make fifty feet or even a hundred...let's make it a full five hundred or even a thousand feet. Let's say that you sitting on the edge of this platform and you have on a harness attaching you to a zip line. For those heathen among us that never had the chance to go to church camp, a zip line is a long cable that runs from some high point, usually a platform, down to a low point, usually the ground, on which people zip downward at a high rate of speed by means of attached harness...it's loads of fun and scarier than anything and always makes girls scream and sometimes even makes the boys scream too.

Anyway, I want you to imagine that you are sitting on the edge of this platform that is enormously high and you are looking at the cable you are about to zip down and looking at your harness and how it is connected to the cable and then looking down to the landing area which is so far away you can't even see it and then you turn to the young man who hooked you all up in the first place and who waiting patiently to push you off the edge and you say, "Hey, let me ask you a question, "Is this thing really going to hold me? I mean, is it really and truly something I can rely on or am I just kidding myself?"

To which he says, "Well, here's the thing. If it doesn't hold you're dead. There is just no way to get around it. You're dead and not just dead...but I mean excruciatingly and painfully dead because although you can't see it from here...way down there...at the place where the harness would most likely break

you will be suspended 10 or fifteen feet over a downward slanting rocky cliff covered with cactus...so if it breaks you'll fall headlong into that and if that isn't bad enough that cactus is infested with extraordinarily vicious fire ants and not just the typical fire ants that most people know about but fire ants that are six to eight inches long and can sting you a hundred times in a second. Of course, you won't just stop there you will be tumbling down the steep downward slope of that place towards a sharp drop-off, a cliff that drops two or three hundred into a pool of ravenous saltwater crocodiles and you know how nasty they can be. So the good news is though you will suffer excruciating pain in the fall and tumble you will in the end be completely eaten up by vicious crocodiles unless you have the misfortune of landing on one particular rocky outcrop on the way down. I say misfortune because that particular outcrop is covered with an exotic creature that is a cross between a box-jellyfish, a black mamba, and an earwig. First, it first bites you like a snake, then stings you like a jellyfish and then after you are completely helpless crawls in your ear and does the whole things again from the inside out.

Still, you needn't worry. The harness will hold and you'll be able to enjoy the sights as you zip past them on a really exciting ride and when you get down to the end someone will be waiting there for you with a nice mint julep. Alright then, are you ready? Here you go."

Now I posed that little scene for you this morning not because that is Paul's argument ...I am not arguing that at all...but rather because that is the structure of his argument. My little jaunt was to show you *how* Paul argues his point not to show you the *content* of Paul's argument. My little jaunt was fun...Paul's is anything but.

Now I want you to keep that in mind this morning as we dig into the text in 1 Corinthians 15:12-34. But before we do that let me take just a minute and remind you of the content of Paul's argument from our text last week in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. What we saw there was that Paul turned his attention to the content of the gospel. That is, he turned his attention to making sure that the Corinthians heard again...heard afresh the message of the gospel.

Now the implication is, of course, that they had forgotten or perhaps more likely never really learned experientially for themselves the true content of the gospel. So he spells it out for them all over again. And what Paul tells them is that the gospel is the proclamation:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:3**...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

So the gist of what he says is that Christ died according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised according to the Scripture and that He appeared to his disciples after he was raised. That is the gospel plain and simple. It is not a bunch of health and wealth nonsense or gobbledygook. It is simply Christ dying according the Scriptures, being buried and then being raised according to the Scriptures and then appearing. Now that doesn't mean that the implications of the gospel aren't a lot broader than just those plain simple facts, they are. But what we must never do is to confuse the implications of the gospel with the facts of the gospel because when we do that we wind up changing the content of the gospel.

Now I want you to think keep in mind what the content of the gospel is because there were apparently a number of people in Corinth who were denying the reality of the resurrection. Now think about that. The gospel is the death of Christ according to the Scriptures, his burial and his resurrection according to the Scriptures. But if someone denies his resurrection, what is it they are they saying about the gospel?

Well I think you can see that what they are saying is that the gospel isn't true. Now I make that remark knowing full well that it sometimes makes people nervous. I make it even though I have one commentary where the commentator, a very good commentator by the way, writes this:

We can reconstruct what they denied about the resurrection and the reasons behind this denial only by making inferences from Paul's reply. Obviously, this method is fraught with difficulties that can result in a serious misreading of the text, and proposals about what the Corinthians denied about the resurrection differ.¹

I have to tell you, I disagree with that. You see, I don't think it is all that difficult to figure out what was happening because Paul tells us what was happening in a way that is plain enough for anyone to understand. He does that right off in the first verse we are looking at this morning, 1 Corinthians 15:12. Look at what he says.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:12**...Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

You see Paul isn't nearly as concerned about being careful as we are. Paul cuts right to the heart of the issue when he asks, "If Christ is proclaimed as having

been resurrected how can some of you say there is no resurrection?" Now I will admit that there are a number of commentators that say think that perhaps Paul misunderstood the Corinthians and that some of those commentators are quite famous. But to me...saying that Paul misunderstood the Corinthians is a little like saying Luther misunderstood the doctrine of justification only a thousand times worse.² I don't think the problem was Paul misunderstanding the Corinthians.³ No, I think the problem was what the Corinthians were claiming and that Paul understood them perfectly.⁴ You see in denying the resurrection the Corinthians weren't just throwing out the baby with the bathwater. No they were throwing out the bathtub and the hot water heater and all the plumbing fixtures combined. You see what Paul is saying here is something to the effect of, "Don't you people realize that the whole Christian message is tied up part and parcel in the resurrection and that when you throw out the resurrection you are throwing out the very core of the Christian faith. What's wrong with you people?"

Still the exact nature of how they argued against the resurrection is unclear and commentators wind up perusing the universe with their theories.⁵ I do like, however, what Charles Hodge writes here about what some of the Corinthians were arguing.

Most probably, these objectors thought, that to reunite the soul with the body was to shut it up again in prison; and that it was as much a degradation and retrocession, as if a man should again become an unborn infant. 'No,' these philosophers said, 'the hope of the resurrection "is the hope of swine." The soul having once been emancipated from the defiling encumbrance of the body, it is never to be re-imprisoned.'⁶

I like what Gerhardus Vos says here even better.

Among the evils which threatened the life of the church at Corinth (and to correct which was Paul's chief end in writing this epistle) were certain doubts and errors on the subject of the resurrection. Evidently Paul attributed very great importance to these. You can infer this from the fact that in dealing with the various abnormal conditions in the church, he reserves the treatment of this particular evil for the close of the epistle. He wanted the impression of what he had to say on this point to be the final and most lasting impression left upon the minds of the Corinthians. All the other problems concerning such matters as divisions and partisanship, the relapse into pagan modes of living, marriages between believers and unbelievers – important though they were in themselves – belonged after all to the periphery, the outcome, not the root and centre of Christianity.

But with the resurrection, it was a totally different matter. Here the heart, the core, the very foundation and substance of the Christian faith were at stake. Paul felt that if on this vital point a serious departure from the truth were allowed to develop unhindered, then sooner or later, by the inexorable law of organic disease, the whole body was doomed to destruction.⁷

I really like that last part..."if on this vital point a serious departure were allowed...the whole body was doomed to destruction."

Still, if you like it even simpler, Luther is best. He writes this:

Paul stakes everything on the basic factor with which he began, namely, that Christ arose from the dead. This is the chief article of the Christian doctrine. No one who at all claims to be a Christian or a preacher of the Gospel may deny that. With this he wants to confront them and force them to the conclusion that their denial of the resurrection of the dead denies even more definitely that Christ rose from the dead; for if the former is not true, the latter must be fabricated also. And since every Christian must believe and confess that Christ has risen from the dead, it is easy to persuade him to accept also the resurrection of the dead; or he must deny in a lump the Gospel and everything that is proclaimed of Christ and of God. For all of this is linked together like a chain, and if one article of faith stands, they all stand. Therefore Paul also makes all things interdependent here, and he always deduces one thing from the other.⁸

I love that. You've just got to love Luther. You've just got to love Paul. And we've got to love and hang on to the resurrection.

Now, here's how Paul lays out his argument.

In 1 Corinthians 15:13-19, Paul discusses the dreadful reality of how things are if there is no resurrection (remember the zip line). In verse 20-28, he sums up the glorious reality of what is true since (and notice I say since and not if) the resurrection is true and then finally he concludes in verse 29-32, with a nice little application for the Corinthians in light of the truth of the resurrection.

First, Paul describes the dreadful reality of how things would actually be if the Corinthians were right and there was no resurrection of the dead. Look at verse 13.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:13**...But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

I think you can see his point. If there is no resurrection as some of them have been arguing then not even Christ has been raised from the dead. You can see I think how you cannot have one thing without having the other. You cannot have Christ being resurrected from the dead unless there is the possibility of a resurrection and you cannot have the possibility of a resurrection if Christ has not been raised. Still Paul argues that the implications of their view don't stop there. Paul pushes their logic to its inevitable conclusion. Look at verse 14.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:14**...And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Now the logic here is inescapable. If the gospel is about the resurrection of Christ and there is no such thing as resurrection, then the gospel is not true and our preaching is in vain...yeah, even more, our faith is in vain. Now I have to make that point while telling you at the same time that there are a number of people that hold to a form of Christian faith while denying or minimizing the importance of the resurrection. It's hard to imagine but it's true. Listen to a quote from D.A. Carson in a terrific article from the *Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*.

A little over two years ago, a reporter put a crucial question to the then Anglican Archbishop of Perth, at the time the Anglican Primate of Australia. The reporter asked, "If we discovered the tomb of Jesus, and could somehow prove that the remains in the tomb were Jesus' remains, what would that do to your faith?" The Archbishop replied that it wouldn't do anything to his faith: Jesus Christ has risen in his heart. The apostle Paul understands the issues with much more straightforward clarity: if Christ has not risen, your faith is futile (1 Cor 15:17). In other words, part of the validation of faith is the truthfulness of faith's object—in this case, Jesus' resurrection. If Jesus has not risen, they can believe it 'till the cows come home, but it is still a futile belief that makes them look silly: they "are to be pitied more than all men" (15:17). There is no point getting angry with the former Archbishop of Perth: he and his opinions on this matter are painfully pitiful.⁹

Now what Paul argues in a Corinthians 15 is that preaching the gospel apart from the truth of the resurrection is vanity. It is vanity and faith based upon such preaching is also vanity. Now I don't see how you can have it both ways, either the resurrection is true and the gospel is true and our faith is valid or it's not. If the resurrection isn't true, our faith is pointless. But for Paul the downward progression doesn't stop there. Look at what he says in verse 15.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:15**...We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.

You can see his point here. If the resurrection did not occur and Christ is not raised, we are dead in our sins and while that is bad it is made even worse by the fact that we have misrepresented God by arguing that Christ has been raised. And yet even that may not be the end of the matter. If there is no resurrection, it may just be that we not only totally misrepresent God but actually wind up going toe to toe with Him in claiming what He Himself, in fact, did not claim. Listen to what Gordon Fee writes:

The logical conclusion of their position, with its consequence that Christ is not raised, is not only that Paul's and the other apostles' preaching is to no avail, but that *it is also* a lie. If the fact itself is untrue, then the testimony to the fact is equally untrue. Even worse, it is a lie carried out in God's name, so that by implication their denial of the resurrection of the dead finally implicates God himself: "More than that" Paul says, "we are also found to be false witnesses of God, because we have borne witness against God by saying that he raised Christ from the dead, whom he did not raise, if indeed the dead are not raised."¹⁰

Calvin makes the same point in his commentary when he says that denying the resurrection is not something to be thought of in a trivial manner because it makes the Apostles, who were ordained by God to be the heralds of his eternal truth, to be the greatest liars of all time and that their lies ultimately bring dishonor to God's holy name.¹¹

Calvin then goes on to say something even more powerful. Namely that since the apostles spoke what God told them to speak, denying the truth of the resurrection implies that God Himself is a liar. Listen to how Calvin puts it.

The expression, *false witnesses of God*...may mean that they were detected as *liars*, in testifying what they had received from God. *And if that is the case* it involves a crime that is much more heinous...God is made guilty of falsehood in the witnesses that have been brought forward and hired by him. The reason, too, that

is added, corresponds well — because they had declared what was false, not as from themselves, but from God.¹²

In verse 17, Paul goes on to conclude if any of that is true, the result is totally devastating.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:17...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Do you see his conclusion? If the resurrection didn't occur...all those you loved that have gone before you like moldering in the grave with no hope in the world and that we as Christians, dumb and deluded by a lie, are of all the people in the world the most to be pitied in that we have squandered whatever time we had in hope of pursuing eternal life when we could have been pursuing the lusts of the flesh. If any of the contention that the Corinthians were making that there was no resurrection, how much better it would to have been to live like the pagans who lived like the devil and then had written on their tombs, "*non fui, fui, non sum, no curo*" which meant, "I was, I am not, I don't care."¹³

Now I have to tell you it is a great relief to me when Paul finally switches gears in verse 20. Just wading through the relentless solemnity of his argument weighs down my soul. I can't imagine how the Corinthians must have resounded to what he wrote. It is hard to imagine what that gathering must have been have. Anyway, I find it a great relief when he finally comes to verse twenty and presents the flipside of his argument.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:20...But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

What a glorious word that little conjunction “but” is at the beginning of verse 20. It negates the terribly dark image Paul has painted in the previous section. It floods over the tragic night of what would be true if there were no resurrection with the splendor of a noonday sun and forces the dark shadow there to flee for its life. And the reason it does that is because it bonds our destiny to the resurrection of Christ Himself. Notice that word “firstfruits”. You see when Paul uses the word “firstfruit” he isn’t really focusing on the fact that Christ is first...that is true...but what he is focusing on is the fact that Christ’s resurrection means that the harvest is not far away and that much, much more fruit is about to come ripe. It is a wonderful metaphor.

When my mom and dad lived on the farm, they used to do the same sort of thing. Whenever some sort of fruit would start to come ripe, my dad would call me and say something like, “I picked and ate my first blackberry today” or “I picked and ate my first peach today” and the point wasn’t just that he had harvested or eaten a single blackberry or peach but that rather that pretty soon there would be tons of ripe peaches or blackberries and I needed to make plans to come to help gather them all in.

You see Paul’s point is that the firstfruits guarantee what is to come. And when Paul makes that point he connects us and our resurrection inextricably to Jesus. You can see that that was his intention all along in verse twenty-one.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:21...For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

You see Paul says that all men are inextricably linked either to Adam or to Christ. They are linked to Adam because of original sin but that link is the way of “dusty death”¹⁴ because Adam was the “firstfruit” of death. He opened the door of death and every man since has had to go through that door. You see Adam was our great federal head, our great representative head, of death. He is our champion leading us down to the grave but in Christ we have a new federal head, a new representative head, a new champion who has been raised from the dead by God as God’s statement to us that He has approved of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and has justified in His sight us on the basis of what Christ accomplished on our behalf on the cross.

I love what Geerhardus Vos writes here:

For Paul, the resurrection stands in the center of the gospel as a gospel of justification—of deliverance from the guilt of sin. To him, the one religious question which overshadows in importance all others is the question: ‘How shall a sinful man become righteous in the sight of God?’ Now if the resurrection of Christ had nothing to contribute towards the solution of this one stupendous problem, then (whatever significance in other connections might belong to it) it could scarcely be said to be of the heart of the gospel. It would have to recede into the shadow of the cross.

As a matter of fact, this frequently takes place in our minds when we think of the forgiveness of sins. That justification depends on the cross is one of the commonplaces of our evangelical belief; so much so that we hardly ‘deem it necessary to ask whether the resurrection perhaps may not have an equally important bearing on this great concern of our souls with the righteousness of God. Now it appears from these words of our text that to Paul the resurrection is an absolutely necessary step in the work of atonement and justification. ‘If Christ has not been raised,’ he says to the Corinthians, ‘your faith is vain.’ That is to say, your faith is ineffective and worthless because ‘Ye are yet in your sins.’ It is justifying faith—faith in its connection with the forgiveness of sins—the efficacy of which is somehow bound up with the Savior’s resurrection.

Nor is this the only place in the epistles of Paul where the justification of the believer and the resurrection of Christ are joined together. Elsewhere we read that our Christian faith, on which the imputation of righteousness depends, is in God as the one who raised Jesus from the dead (*Rom.* 10:9). Christ was delivered for our sins; he was raised for our justification (*Rom.* 4:25). Nobody can lay anything to the charge of God's elect; God justifies and none can condemn because it is Christ Jesus who died and was raised from the dead (*Rom.* 8:33, 34).¹⁵

Isn't that simply lovely? And you can see that is Paul's thought in the next verse when he says that every man, woman boy or girl belongs in one garden or the other.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:23**...But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Paul's point in referring to "order" here is that each person belongs one place or the other and because that is true the resurrection, which some of them are denying, is absolutely essential. You can also see that the resurrection is here linked to Christ's return. Paul says about as plainly as he can that when Christ returns those who belong to Christ will be resurrected finally and forever...which means that they will gain at last their new bodies...bodies that are without sin and incorruptible. Then and only then will everything be put right. Then and only then will the chain of effects that Christ has put into motion will come to conclusion.¹⁶ Look at what Paul says in verse 24.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:24**...Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him,

then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Now the idea is not that Christ will somehow be metaphysically subordinated to God. The idea is soteriological not ontological...that is, it is concerned with salvation and not with being. You see Paul's point is that then and only then will the wondrous work of redemption be brought to a close. Death will be forever vanquished. Everything that the work of redemption has sought to gain will be gained and you and I will stand with all of the saints of all of the ages in a sea of beaming faces made perfect and glorified in our new bodies and Christ will be there as our great and glorious head and he will present us to the Father once and for all.

He will stand before the Father and turn and look back at the work of His hands and turn again to the Father and say, "Father here they are and now we are one" and brothers and sisters all that is tied to the resurrection of Christ. So, how can we ever give that up and say there is no resurrection. I say to you all that we cannot give it up.

That is why when I speak the truth to you and say, "Christ the Lord is risen" it is such a rousing thing to my soul to hear you respond and say..."He is risen indeed."

Let's pray.

¹ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 698.

² Garland, 699. The list includes men like Bultmann (no surprise) and Schmithals. I really like the quote that Garland includes from Holleman, “If one supposes that Paul misrepresents the Corinthian opinion it becomes impossible to know the Corinthians’ opinion at all.”

³ C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 347. Barrett writes about some of the many theories as to what was actually being denied, “Alternatively, it may be that what was denied was the idea of resurrection, while some kind of immortality or survival was affirmed; this is suggested by Lietzmann, who quotes Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80: [There are false Christians, not to be credited as Christians,] who say that there is no resurrection of the dead, but that at death their souls are received up into heaven. Some think that this was the situation, and that Paul misunderstood it, wrongly supposing that to deny resurrection was to deny all forms of future life. But again, it was not so simple. Jews, Paul among them, had immortality in their tradition as well as resurrection. We shall probably be right in recalling iv. 8. One aspect of Corinthian error appears to have been the belief that eschatological conditions have already been fulfilled; compare 2 Tim. ii. i8—according to Hymenaeus and Philetus the resurrection had already happened.”

⁴ A.J.M Wedderburn, “The Problem of the Denial of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians XV” in *Novum Testamentum*, XXXIII, 3, 1981. Wedderburn (pg. 240) argues that Paul probably misunderstood the Corinthian position. I just can’t go there.

⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 98. Talbert holds as many do that the problem was an over realized eschatology.

⁶ Charles Hodge. *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1 Corinthians 15:12.

⁷ Gerhardus Vos, “The Joy of Resurrection Life” in *Grace and Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 155-168.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 28: 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy* ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 28:94.

⁹ D.A. Carson, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: 1 Corinthians 15:1-19” in *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*, Spring 2008. http://www.thespurgeonfellowship.org/Spring08/journal_home.htm

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing:, 1987), pp. 721-2.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 15:15.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Non fui, fui, non sum, no curo.* I was not, I was, I am not, I don't care. (Dessau, 8126) This appears so often that only the initials are sometimes given on tombs—*NFNN*.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5.

¹⁵ Vos, 157-158.

¹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing:, 1987), pp. 721-2.