



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 25: Now Concerning the Collection... 1 Corinthians 15:51-16:24

This morning we come to the end of our study in 1st Corinthians and what we have seen, I think, over the last couple of weeks is that Paul saved his biggest concern for the end of his letter. Oh, he does cover a few other issues in Corinthians in the final chapter. But you can tell from his tone and diction that the most pressing issue...the very capstone of his letter...has been the resurrection. What we have seen is that Paul had caught wind of a Corinthian denial of both the reality and importance of the resurrection and that their denial had driven him to defend the vital importance of the resurrection. For Paul, the truth of the gospel depended on the resurrection. But Paul wasn't satisfied just to establish the truth of the resurrection and its importance to the proclamation of the gospel. Paul went beyond that to answer some of the Corinthians' questions about the nature of the resurrection body itself. The way Paul sets that up is to pose an imaginary interlocutor or interrogator asking him this question. We can assume, I think, that Paul puts the words of the Corinthians in the mouth of this imaginary interrogator. He has him say something like this, "Now Paul, you've gone on and on about the resurrection so would you tell us then just what kind of bodies the dead have when they are raised?"

You can see that in verse 35.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:35**...But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"

Now in his answer to this imaginary questioner, Paul lays out the fact that the body which is raised is different than the body that is sown in death. It is different because the body that is sown when it is buried after death is corruptible; the body that is raised is not. Paul goes on to explain that the very nature of the two bodies is different. They are as different from each other as fish are from birds and birds are from men. You can see that in verse 39.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:39**...For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. ⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead.

So you can see that Paul is quite concerned to make sure that the Corinthians understand that the resurrection body is different than the body that went into the grave. Now in all likelihood, Paul felt the need to explain that because the Corinthians found the idea of raising a dead corpse repugnant. Most scholars think the Corinthians had in mind something like reanimation...but Paul's idea is one of transformation. That is, Paul had the idea in mind that the body that is raised is different than the one sown. It is raised a spiritual body.

Now Paul's whole discussion concerning the resurrection of the dead leads quite naturally, I think, to a question about what happens to those who are still alive at

the time of the resurrection. It is fairly natural, I think, that the question would come up.

When I first started teaching school some thirty years ago, I used to have a girl in my class that would always ask me the question, "But Mr. Browning, what about me?" If I told someone in the class that he did well on some assignment her hand would go up immediately and she would ask, "What about me?" If I ask someone to do something for me...something simple like erase the chalkboard she would ask, "But Mr. Browning, what about me?" Whenever I read this passage here in 1 Corinthians 15, I always think about that young lady because it seems to me that Paul is answering that same old question. It seems to me that someone must have invariably asked, "But Paul, what about us. What about those of us that have not died. What will happen to us at the resurrection?"

It's a terrific question don't you think?

And the way Paul answers that question is to explain that everyone will be changed...that everyone must be changed before the end comes. Now the place where that change occurs is at the second coming of Christ. That is, at Christ's return, those that have died will be changed in that their perishable bodies will be made imperishable and those that are still alive at the time of Christ's return will be changed too. Their mortal bodies, which are subject to death, will be made immortal.¹ You can see that starting in verse 51.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:51**...Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable,

and we shall be changed.⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

Now that word “mystery” is used some twenty-one times in Paul’s letters and when it is used it doesn’t mean exactly what we mean when we normally use the word. No, when we normally use the word we mean “something secret or unknown”. When Paul uses the word he means something that used to be unknown but that has now been revealed. I want you to think about that. What Paul says is this, “Now here is something that used to be unknown but has now been revealed to us by God...namely, that we won’t all die...but, we will all be changed.

Now that is a grand and glorious truth. But it is a truth that has spawned all kinds of weird and wonderful speculation. So I think it might be wise to spend a moment or two here to think through what the Bible has to say about Christ’s return. It is important to do that because in our day, a lot of ink has been spilled to propagate the doctrine of a secret Rapture. You can find the idea in any number of books or novels...books like Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series. Now I do know a little about the view...principally because I graduated seminary from the school that has done more to advance that idea than just about any other seminary in the world and while I don’t want to undertake here a full blown lesson on eschatology or end times here in the last lesson on 1 Corinthians, I do think it might be worth a bit of time to point out the fact that the simplicity of the biblical view and the complexity of the dispensational view of these end time events are pretty different. In a nutshell, the idea behind the dispensational view of a secret Rapture is that Christ will return secretly for His church, snatch them away like a thief in the night, and then take them back to heaven where they will remain for a seven

year period know as the Great Tribulation. After that seven year period of suffering on the earth, Christ will return to earth with His saints and set up a thousand year millennium kingdom in which He will reign from Jerusalem over a mixed realm of glorified and non-glorified saints.

Now dispensationalists hold their view of a secret rapture based on their understanding of 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4.²

^{ESV} **1 Thessalonians 4:13**...But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Now notice how that language is repeated in 1 Corinthians 15.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:51**...Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

And the problem is, of course, that you can't see any of the complex ideas of a secret rapture or a group of people being left behind or a thousand year millennial rule or any of that from the text. From these two text, you see something much grander and yet much simpler. You see the coming of the Lord with trumpet and

fanfare. I like what one scholar said, "This scene here in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 is about the least secret thing in the Bible.³ It involves the shout of the command of the Lord Himself, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God." And the idea is that the Lord shouts out his command, the archangel spreads the command and the trumpeter blows his horn to assemble the Lord's army and then they are assembled right then and there. That gathering is known by most Bible scholars as the "parousia" which is another word for "the coming".⁴ That word is used both in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. Anyway, when he comes, you have the resurrection of the dead and the beginning of the final state. That is, you have the end of sin, death and the grave, There is no seven year period, no antichrist, no helicopters with machine guns spreading havoc and destruction. What you have is the Lord Jesus...raising the dead, transforming their bodies to heavenly bodies and once and for all destroying death and the grave. And you can tell that from the very next verse...verse 54.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:54...When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Now I have to tell you I love that imagery contained in this particular passage. It seems to me that it is almost the language of the courtroom, where a lawyer points at a defendant and then shakes his long boney finger and asks, "And what do you have to say now...now, that you have been exposed for what you are?"

It reminds very much of Saddam Hussein's trial at the point when the Iraqi prosecutors who were involved with the trial finally came to realize that they had nothing to fear from Hussein himself. They would shout at him and say things to

his face they never dreamed they would be able to say. That's the imagery here. Paul says someone will at last be able to point at death and say, "Where is your victory now? Where is your sting now?"⁵ And death will hand his head low and the only answer will be the stony silence because his victory will have been turned to a rout and his sting to a feather.⁶

Now the reason that death will be made impotent is because sin will be done away. We know that from the two verse that follow in verse 56.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:56**...The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see in Paul's mind deliverance from sin and death is not just some fact to acknowledge...not just some interesting theological tidbit. No, it is a foundational element of praise and worship.

I particularly like what Calvin says here about the law.

It is the law of God that imparts to that sting its deadly power, because it does not merely discover our guilt, but even increases it.⁷

Now for Paul the end result of this glorious truth about the resurrection and the future hope that we have is that it ought to lead us to a genuine measure of stability. That is Paul's logic and it ought to be ours as well. Look at what he says in verse 58.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:58**...Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Now you can see, I think, the logic of Paul's position. If we no longer have to fear death...if ultimately we know that all will be put right...what is there to fear...what is there to dread? And the fact that there is nothing to fear means that we ought to be steadfast in the work of the Lord. You see it is that sure and certain hope that will sustain us...keep us going on dark, sleepless night. It will keep us going when we're sick or lonely or feel forgotten or neglected. I think that is the point Paul is making implicitly to the Corinthians. I think he is implying that if the Corinthians give up the hope of the resurrection they are undermining the very bedrock on which their feet ought to be firmly planted.

Whenever I think about this particular truth, I cannot help but think of the opening of chapter two of *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer. Packer writes:

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, "for I've known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me and set me thinking.⁸

I love that paragraph so much and cannot tell you how often I have clung to the truth it contains...and it is the very point Paul is making. In light of where we stand in our hope of the gospel and of the resurrection, we ought to be steadfast.

Now you can see in the next verse that Paul returns to the subject of the letter the Corinthians had sent him.⁹ That is, he picks up another question from their letter. You can tell that from the little phrase, now concerning" at the beginning of chapter 16.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 16:1**...Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

Now what we know, and Kyle has even made the point in his series on Galatians, was that the apostolic church was very much concerned with providing relief to those beleaguered saints at Corinth. This passage in 1 Corinthians 16 is the first of three or four places where Paul mentions a collection for the saints at Jerusalem. He mentions it here. He mentioned it in Galatians 2:9-10.

^{ESV} **Galatians 2:10**...Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

He mentioned it in Romans 15.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:25**...At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

He mentions it again in 2 Corinthians 8.

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 8:1**...We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I

can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints--

And Luke mentions it in Acts 24 where he has Paul say to Felix:

^{ESV} **Acts 24:17**...Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.

Listen to what R.H. Stein writes in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* about this offering. I can't do better than what he has written there so I will simply read what he says.

In his three longest letters Paul mentions a collection being made by the Gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem...Its importance for Paul is evidenced not only by the amount of space he devotes to this in his letters but also by several other factors. For one, the collection took a great deal of time and effort on his part to assemble. During the period of the collection, he had an experience in which he despaired of life itself, but the collection *continued*. The effort *required for the offering was enormous*....it was to be collected weekly, and representatives were to be chosen who would supervise the taking of the collection all the way to Jerusalem. The offering itself took over a year to complete and involved churches in at least three major provinces...it *even* required that Paul postpone his planned mission to Spain. Luke mentions seven people who accompanied the offering, and Acts 20:16 suggests that a sufficiently high percentage of the passengers on the ship were accompanying Paul and the collection that the apostle could influence the *ship's* itinerary. *Neither* plots (Acts 20:3), *nor* danger (Acts 20:23) *nor* warnings (Acts 21:4, 10-14) could dissuade *Paul* from carrying out this mission.

The collection served a number of purposes for Paul. It was at the very least an act of love which met a real need in the Jerusalem church. *The collection served* as proof of the Gentiles' faith by demonstrating their love for other Christians.

Another reason Paul felt so strongly concerning the collection was that it provided an opportunity to reinforce the bonds of unity between Jews and Gentiles within the church. This was especially important in light of the division caused by his opponents *of the gospel*. This unity, for Paul,...was based on the corporate nature of their being "in Christ."

A third reason why the collection was important for Paul involved the eschatological significance of this event. Paul understood the collection as symbolizing in some way the eschatological ingathering of the Gentiles into the people of God. It is quite unlikely that he thought that the collection would be the means by which the Jews would become jealous and turn in faith to God, that is, he did not think that it would be the event that would bring about the fulfillment of Romans 11:13–27. Yet this collection would symbolize the “first fruits” of the offering of the Gentiles to God. The collection was itself an offering to God, but in a deeper sense it symbolized that now the Gentile world was coming in faith to God.

Salvation had come to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 13:47).¹⁰

Now after he delivers that offering, Paul explains that he intends to come to see the Corinthians.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 16:5**...I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. ¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

Now Paul uses the phrase “passing through” but we ought to understand that that doesn’t mean what we mean today by passing through.¹¹ Travel in ancient times was much slower than it is today. What Paul means is that he intends to spend some time with them. He tells them that he may even spend the winter with them and that he wants them to receive Timothy in his place until he comes and that they should treat him with respect. You will remember that Timothy was quite young and often disregarded on that account.

Paul then turns to commend Apollos to the Corinthians.

ESV 1 Corinthians 16:12...Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

It is significant, I think, that he commends Apollos to them in light of the fact that there were divisions in Corinth over whether to follow Paul or Apollos. Paul is making the point that he and Apollos are together in the ministry and are both fulfilling their ministries by doing what needs to be done.¹² He makes that point while at the same time letting them know that Apollos did not desire to go there.¹³ I think it may mean that both he and Paul understand what the Corinthians were like. Certainly, he explain that there is no rivalry between them; they are partners.¹⁴

Paul then reminds them again to be watchful and to stand firm in the faith. The repetition of what he has already said just a few verses earlier is pretty telling. Look at verse 13.

ESV 1 Corinthians 16:13...Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love. ¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers--you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints-- ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men.

Now I do think it is pretty clear from the text that Paul believed or thought that the coming of Christ was near. That has a lot to do with the repetition of the

charge to stand firm. The idea is that since Christ was coming soon, the Corinthians ought to be on the alert.

Now Paul ends the book with a few personal greetings...a reminder to take the gospel seriously and an appeal to the Lord to come.

Look at what he says in verse 19.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 16:19**...The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰ All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Now Aquila and Prisca were instrumental in the founding of the church at Corinth but had apparently moved on to Ephesus. From all I can tell, they were very much itinerant missionaries.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 16:21**...I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Paul ends the letter with his own greeting and his own signature. He signed all of his epistles with his own hand. He commends the Corinthians and curses all those who do not love the Lord Jesus and expresses his own personal love for the Corinthians.

Now what are we to make of this letter to the Corinthians? Well there are a number of applications and I don't want to repeat them all but I do think one thing we can come away with is that we ought not to expect that church life is always going to be perfect. If there is one thing that Corinthians definitely teaches it is that whenever redeemed sinners get together there will sometimes be

problems. Now those problems seem to especially occur whenever we focus on individuals and not on the beauty of the gospel. It is important that first and foremost we keep the gospel in view and that as we do that we will find that it is powerful enough even to redeem Christians. When we keep that in mind we will learn to live for each other, and learn each other's names and fellowship together not around our personalities but around the gospel. Paul hammers that again and again...it is the gospel that redeems and transforms...it is powerful...so powerful it can even transform Christians.

Now in just a minute I want to make some recommendations for some commentaries but before I do that let's pray.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 15:51. He writes, "A question presented itself, what then will become of those who will be still living at the day of the Lord? His answer is, that although *all will not die*, yet they will be renewed, that mortality and corruption may be done away."

² Calvin, 15:52. He writes, "Though the repetition of the term might seem to place it beyond a doubt, that the word *trumpet* is here taken in its proper acceptance, yet I prefer to understand the expression as metaphorical. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, he connects together the *voice of the archangel* and the *trump of God*: As therefore a commander, with the sound of a trumpet, summons his army to battle, so Christ, by his far sounding proclamation, which will be heard throughout the whole world, will summon all the dead."

³ "Obsessed with Rapture" from the The White Horse Inn Radio Program. I think the quote was from the Reverend Ken Jones.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing:, 1987), 800. "There in particular (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), it is difficult to avoid the plain sense of the language, that he expected to be among the living at the Parousia. That does not mean that he lived in intense, eager expectation of it, as is sometimes maintained, but that he simply expected it to happen within his lifetime.

⁵ Charles Hodge. *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1 Corinthians 15:55. "In Hosea 13:14 God says, "O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction." This is a literal version of the Hebrew. The Vulgate comes near to it, *Ero mors tua, O mors! Morsus tuus ero, inferne!* The LXX. depart from the figure, "Where is thy judgment (or vengeance), O death? where is thy sting, O grave?" These are all different forms of expressing the idea that death and the grave

are completely conquered. The apostle does not quote the prophet. He expresses an analogous idea in analogous terms. In speaking of death as furnished with a sting, the most natural figure is that of a scorpion. Others say that κέντρον here means a goad, and that death is compared to a man driving animals before him with such an instrument. The power of a goad is as nothing to that of the sting of a scorpion, Revelation 9:5, 6, 10, and the figure is therefore far more forcible as commonly understood."

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 28: 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy* edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 28:203. Luther writes, "When that (and by that...Luther means the resurrection) comes to pass, Paul says, this will be fulfilled; now we say: *it is written*, but then we shall say: *it is done*. The time will come when that which is now always preached and spoken about will actually happen and be carried out. And what is that? It is the fact recorded in the words: "Death is swallowed up in victory." St. Paul states that these words are found in Scripture; I really do not know where in Scripture. They seem to be taken from the prophet Hosea, chapter 13:14, where we read: "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, I will be your poison. O Sheol, I will be your plague (or pestilence)." That is to say: "I will kill you and do away with you." *I think that because* in Scripture poison and pestilence are regarded as a deadly evil, which quickly destroys and kills a person, for instance, when he is stung by the most venomous adders or when he gets a high, virulent fever or contracts the pestilence. It is natural also for the bite of a snake to bring about a fever. St. Paul may have had that in mind and paraphrased it with a few words."

⁷ Calvin, 15:58.

⁸ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 24.

⁹ Fee, 810.

¹⁰ R.H. Stein, "Jerusalem" in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1993), 472.

¹¹ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 757.

¹² F. W. Grosheide, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans' Publishing House, 1953), 401.

¹³ C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 392. Barrett seems to imply that Apollos' decision not to go to Corinth was not his own but the joint decision of both he and Paul. The text seems to say that the decision was Apollos' decision alone.

¹⁴ Garland, 761.