

Raised Bodies, Open Wallets

Resurrection and Replenishment in Paul's Closing

1 Corinthians 15 -- 16

A Prep Guide

by Allen Hilton

Every April, you and I get all dressed up for a worship celebration we mostly can't explain. Ask any Christian, left to right, staid to Pentecostal, traditional to contemporary, what happened on that ancient Sunday morning and press for details, and you'll get as many different descriptions as you get people to answer. In fact, that pattern began with the very first reports we have. The four Gospels and Paul's 1 Corinthians 15 offer us five accounts of the event, and they differ significantly in their details.

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	1 Cor 15
Mary Mag	Mary Mag "Other" Mary	"the women" Mary (James) Salome	Mary Mag	Peter The 12 500 believers James "All the Apostles" Paul

Earthquake

Angel Descending	Man in white.	2 men white	No one.
Rolls Stone	Stone rolled. Tomb empty. Entered tomb.	Stone rolled. Tomb empty. Entered tomb.	Stone rolled
"Fear not"	"Fear not"	"Why look?"	Nothing
"Tell disciples"	"Tell disciples"	"As he said..."	Tells Peter-Jn
Women go.	Women hide	Women go.	Mary goes.

These differences in the telling of Easter morning have led some skeptics to toss the whole prospect that Jesus rose. Others have seen the multiplicity of different

independent witnesses to the resurrection as testimony to its truth, because concoction and collusion would have produced absolute consistency.

The resurrection of Jesus has prompted passionate conversation for nearly 2,000 years now. Quotations from four 21st-century commentators offer very different viewpoints on the resurrection of Jesus.

Every religious tradition is rooted in mysteries I don't pretend to understand, including claims about what happens after we die. But this I know for sure: as long as we're alive, choosing resurrection is always worth the risk. (Parker Palmer, American Author and Activist)

Presumably what happened to Jesus was what happens to all of us when we die. We decompose. Accounts of Jesus's resurrection and ascension are about as well-documented as Jack and the Beanstalk. (Richard Dawkins, English Atheist)

People have been told so often that resurrection is just a metaphor, and means Jesus died and was glorified - in other words, he went to Heaven, whatever that means. And they've never realized that the word 'resurrection' simply didn't mean that. (N.T. Wright, English NT Scholar)

The best news of the Christian gospel is that the supremely glorious Creator of the universe has acted in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection to remove every obstacle between us and himself so that we may find everlasting joy in seeing and savoring his infinite beauty. (John Piper, American Reformed Baptist Pastor)

As these remarks show, a whole lot of the exchange about the resurrection has clustered around the question of whether Jesus actually came, bodily, out of the grave. In fact, Paul raises the question of resurrection partly because some in Corinth have grown skeptical. As Paul puts it,

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Cor 15.12)

While I applaud the passionate quest for historical truth, we'll allow others to continue that conversation. Our focus in this study for this week will be on the powerful literary and theological and spiritual truth of what Paul thought the resurrection meant and means – for him, for the Corinthians, and for us. Let's go!

The Tradition

Paul begins by reviewing the content he first gave the Corinthians during his extended stay: Jesus' death and resurrection. As we saw above, this account joins four others from the four Gospels, to supply our full complement of resurrection reports. In fact, thinking historically it may be better to say that the Gospel versions joined his, because Paul wrote in the 50s of the first century, and the Gospels seem to have been penned (in final form at least) from the late 60s on. In other words, Paul's resurrection was first to press.

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, ^[a] of the good news ^[b] that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you —unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and 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 and sisters ^[c] at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ^[d]

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. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them —though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

The one significant difference between Paul's resurrection account and the ones we usually hear and celebrate on Easter Sunday is his inclusion of latter -day encounters with the risen Jesus, which did not happen at or near the empty tomb. On the early Christian timeline, his own resurrection appearance came years after "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" peered through the misty Sunday morning air.

The Logic of Last

You and I have read our way through fourteen intense chapters of issues and answers that Paul counted very important for his Corinthian charges. Now, at long last, we arrive at the resurrection. Our question of the moment, then, is simple:

If Paul always puts resurrection first in his gospel -telling — "of first importance", he says -- why does he save the resurrection 'til the end of this letter?

It's a literary question about his decisions as a writer, and it's a different one than the decision made by our Gospel writers. It's quite easy to understand why the Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John put it last: they were telling Jesus' story with a beginning, middle, and end, and resurrection naturally followed birth, life, and death. But why, in a relatively urgent letter to Christians, some of whom have even come to doubt its veracity, would Paul relegate resurrection to his letter's end?

Scholars and commentators have puzzled over this question for a couple thousand years without arriving at any consensus – a fact which gives us some license under the convenient hope that “where experts disagree, we foolish ones are free.” So, let's imagine.

For you and me, Paul's letter is Bible. It comes between Romans and 2 Corinthians as a piece of early Christian literature, in a collected “book of books” we call the New Testament. It's important to recall, though, that for the Corinthian Christians, this was a letter from their pastor. And it came to them, not in a world of electronic words plastered around them, or even of racks and rows of printed words surrounding them. Written words were much more scarce for them than for us, and the arrival of a long letter like this would have been a red letter day in this community's calendar – even if, as we've noticed, some Corinthian Christ-followers were a bit ambivalent about Paul's input.

All of this would have had them waiting with bated breath to hear what he had to say. Have you waited for a graded paper to be handed out in school? Or for news from a potential employer or a romantic prospect or an application of some kind? Imagine that sort of expectancy, tinged with both hope and dread. Finally, on some fine day in Corinth, one of Paul's emissaries walks into their city and the community gathers to hear their pastor's words. In this context, how do you imagine this evening has gone for the Corinthians?

To remind ourselves, we now notice that it has not exactly been a commendation, and Paul's counsel has not been for them to “keep doing what you've been doing”.. After an initial greeting and prayer that praised them – can we remember that far back?! – Paul has launched a consistently critical onslaught of challenges to their current habits. Paul has corrected them at every turn. Let's remind ourselves of that. Here's what the apostle has called them to do:

***Give Up Partisan Pride and Unite* (Chs 1–4)**

In 1.11, Paul chided the Corinthians for “divisions among you” that Chloe's people have shared with him. In the near context, he means partisan preference for one leader over against another – the Paul people vs the Apollos people vs the Peter people vs the Christ people. In the end, it becomes clear that Paul and Apollos are the two main candidates for Corinthian affection. In chapters 1–4, he shows them how God has brought Paul and Apollos into a unified effort.

Paul is asking them to give up their right to choose “their pastor” and charged them, instead, to see the whole lot of leaders as “theirs.”

***Keep One Another Accountable* (Chs 5—6)**

As Paul turns his focus in chapters 5 —10 to re-forming the daily life of his converts, he challenges their worldview (“to each her/his own”) and turns them toward one another. They have sat by and tolerated an egregious case of step -incest without flinching. But Paul passionately believes that they are a community, responsible for one another. They should hold one another to the new standard of God -shaped living, and they should “try their own cases” through internal conversation, rather than external lawsuits – two calls to sacrifice their self-serving ways to become part of a moral community.

***Put the Gospel First* (Ch. 7)**

Before Paul came to Corinth, it had surely never entered the Corinthian mind to ask the question about sex and marriage other than, “What do I want?” Now, when Paul made this part of their life a response to God, some, to their credit, aspired to excel, so they imagined abstinence *within marriage*. Paul here contends two things: that they are not morally disciplined enough to accomplish this, and that they are really misplacing their focus. They shouldn’t ask, “What will win me points?” but rather, “What will I forward God’s work?”

Paul himself chose unmarried celibacy for the sake of the gospel, and in the letter he commends that uncluttered way of living to those few who have the gift. Whatever their capabilities, though, the priority set to which he’s calling them is clear: gospel first, me second. Another sacrifice.

***Defer to the Needs of “the Weak” Brothers and Sisters and Be Intellectually Humble* (Chs 8—10)**

Some Christians in Corinth fancied themselves quite the monotheists. This confidence led them to believe that they could dabble in the old, pre -conversion world of the idol shrines. Paul corrects them in two ways: first, he calls them to consider their fellow Christians’ needs before their own; second, he contends that they may not be as immune from idolatrous temptations as they think. Again here, Paul calls the Corinthians to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the community’s flourish.

***Wait for Brothers and Sisters at Table* (Ch 11)**

The “community meal” of the Corinthian Church was hardly communal. Some were coming early and stuffing themselves with food and wine, so others had no food or drink at all. Paul calls them on this, not as a breach of etiquette, but as a way they dishonor the body of

Christ. This stepping-up of the stakes surely startled them. And, again, Paul calls them to sacrifice their own primacy and desire for the sake of the community.

***Pursue Gifts That Help Brothers and Sisters* (Ch 12—14)**

Paul restructures the Corinthians' value system around their talents and strengths. He calls them to see these, not as ways of distinguishing themselves from the crowd, but rather as ways to serve the community. This love (so elegantly portrayed in the soaring lines of ch. 13) pushes us outward toward the wellbeing of others. Another form of sacrifice.

This hour of listening was likely downright depressing for some in the room. If the Corinthians have waited for their pastor's report card or evaluation of them, what are they feeling at the end of fourteen chapters? C+ at the very best, right? And amid the constant flow of critique and correction, have you noticed the red thread of sacrifice running through chapters 1—14? Paul has noticed it. He's built it into his letter purposely. He is asking the Corinthians to take themselves out of the center of the universe, and he's told them in no uncertain terms that they are very much in that selfish center as he speaks.

Resurrection brilliantly interrupts this thrum, thrum, thrumming of sacrificial living, which is the context for the resurrection chapter, 1 Cor 15. After hearing 14 chapters of "Give yourself up for one another!" spoken in fifty different ways, these Corinthian Christians no doubt turned their heads as the resurrection words of chapter 15 rang out. This promise offers them nothing less than the bright and glorious light of God that awaits deferential disciples. For, as much as we believe Jesus' words in John 10 about "abundant life," faithful Christian disciples empty ourselves for others. The Christian life is hard. The way of love may be a "still more excellent way" (1 Cor 12.31), but self-giving and self-sacrifice are hard. They are not our natural inclination. It can be exhausting. But now, a whole new thing: resurrection!

Resurrection lies ahead, not as some kind of reward for this self-sacrificing faithfulness, but as a proper refilling. Ahead lies the entire fullness of God, experienced intimately and immediately. Paul let a foretaste slip out in his immortal words about love: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13.12) Correction and critique and a call to sacrifice will not be the last word. Light lies ahead!

Resurrection is God's ultimate answer to the sacrifices of the disciples' mortal life, and so it becomes an encouragement amid those sacrifices. After fifty-three verses he hopes will persuade the Corinthians to see Jesus' resurrection as the mere beginning of their own, Paul trumpets good news: "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’
 Where, O death, is your victory?
 Where, O death, is your sting?’

Paul blows the trumpet here for a future glory, an end to suffering, a new spiritual body, a life everlasting. Brilliant light explodes in that ancient living room where you and I have guested these six weeks. The light of victory over the grave, the light of resurrection and life. Paul takes the Corinthians and us beyond the daily pains of life in frail flesh to a time when Christ will be all in all.

That light comes across the ages to brighten our daily duties in a world that can be deeply dark. The exertion of

- ❖ loving neighbors who don’t notice or acknowledge that love,
- ❖ patiently listening to and trying to understand people with whom we passionately disagree,
- ❖ taking the hard steps that transform self-serving habits into generous ones,
- ❖ dealing with “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” and
- ❖ losing loved ones to death or distance.

Resurrection tinges our life in this body with light, of course, but Paul’s promise of one day fully experiencing the end of death’s sting, of “seeing [God] face to face” surely offers us a hope that fuels endurance. Life is now, and large life awaits. Hallelujah indeed!

Amid the afterglow of death done away, Paul naturally recalls these Corinthians (and us) back to the life he’s laid out for this side of the veil, but with a new sense that all this trying and failing, all this handing themselves over, all the pain of growth, shall not be futile:

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”
 (1 Corinthians 15.54-55, 58)

Ask yourself a couple questions that put you in the room with the Corinthians: How does resurrection change the way you live your daily life? And does your ultimate destination in the presence of God free you to give yourself out to others now?

The Bold Claim of a Resurrected Body

Given this logic of the resurrection chapter’s position in the letter, we will focus in our final session together on the shape of Paul’s argument for resurrection. We’ll do this because, along with being the proper answer to a life of sacrifice, there’s also a clear sense in the text that it is also an answer to some Corinthians who doubted the resurrection’s truth.

Plato famously coined a pun that scholars have used to describe a theme within Greek beliefs: “SOMA SEMA” (The body is a tomb.) This denigration of the body has sometime been overemphasized as a capture of all Greek thinking, but it clearly held sway for many: namely, that the fleshy body is the inferior and sometimes nefarious part of the mind – soul-body complex.

Some in Corinth seem to have asked, perhaps with sarcasm dripping off their pens, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Against this grain of Greek disdain for flesh, Paul waxes bold in 1 Corinthians to maintain that resurrection is not simply about a soul’s rise – either for us or for Jesus. For Paul bodies are raised. This sets up a fascinating discussion that introduces a “resurrection body” into the mix. (1 Cor 15.35)

Paul’s answer to this line of questioning brings his Jewish and Hebrew concept of body into conversation with Greek themes and produces the brilliant language that we haul out each April to celebrate Christ’s rising (and our own). We’ll relish these details on Monday evening.

Housekeeping Details – From the Sublime to the Mundane (Chapter 16)

Last words of novels must be profound. Movies must end with a proper denouement. But letters often fizzle out. That’s true of our own e-mails and letters, right? “Tell Angie hi,” or “Don’t forget our lunch next week,” or some other reminder or throw-in are usual in this sort of writing. With that said, Bible readers shouldn’t skip these apparent trivialities. As an example, the last chapter of Paul’s magisterial letter to the Romans features a laundry list of people whom Paul greets in Rome (yawn) but we’d be impoverished without it. Inspected more closely, the names on that list tell us that women were active in Paul’s ministry, that the socio-economic level of the church in Rome ranged from slaves to masters, with every class in between and a racial and cultural mix that would wow our informally segregated 21st century American churches. It’s worth reading these last chapters!

The Collection

Have you ever been to church and not had an offering plate pass through the congregation? If you’re like me, you forget that it’s coming and then scramble to beat the clock and get something out of your wallet before it arrives. If you’re like my much better-prepared beloved wife Liz, you’ve set it aside before you even got in the car to drive to church. In any case, these plates are omnipresent.

At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul passes the plate.

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with

letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. (16.1-4)

A couple things to highlight about this: first, the collection is for other people, not to be spent on themselves and their church's needs. They don't have a building, and it seems that members of the community are charged with supplying food for their meals, so overhead is light. This call to give out not only repeats the thrum thrum thrumming of self-sacrifice we saw above. It also reminds them that their church is not the only game in God's big town.

You may not have noticed it, because the occasions happen almost between the lines of the letter, but Paul has several times hinted that the Corinthian Christians are not the only ones in the world.

- ❖ Paul addresses the letter at the outset, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord^[a] and ours..” (1.2)
- ❖ When he teaches them to, “lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you,” Paul widens the scope: “This is my rule in all the churches.” (7.17)
- ❖ And Paul prefaces the now-qualified-for-us but infamous injunction, that “women should be silent in the churches”, with “as in all the churches of the saints.” (14.34)

Paul wants each of his Christian groups to realize that God's got a growing international operation, whether to encourage them or to chide them. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul commends his very-new Christian group on their rapid reception of the gospel and their boldness to share it. To accentuate his praise, he writes,

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia . ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia —your faith in God has become known everywhere . Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath . (1 Thessalonians 1.6-10)

1 Thessalonians is the letter of Paul that comes most quickly after his visit, so there's a high premium on encouragement. He hopes to bolster his new converts, not only with his praise and their Christian neighbor churches' reports, but also with the sheer confidence that comes with knowing that they're not doing a new thing alone.

In other churches, Paul uses these references for enforcement. He does that here in 1 Corinthians. The references to how Paul does things in all his other churches seem to be a way that he adds authority to his mandates and makes the Corinthian Christians accountable to a way of following Christ that has a much wider reach than just one church.

There's one more gem in this paragraph. From our wider vantage point, looking beyond the letter at mid-first century Christianity (20 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection), we see here Paul's theologically-based diplomacy. He is the renegade apostle, controversial among some for going to Gentiles at all, but to many for inviting Gentiles in without circumcision and Torah. We know from other letters that he has an ambivalent relationship with "the mother ship" of Jerusalem Christianity and James, its leader.

Here and in Philippians 4, Paul calls his Macedonian and Greek churches to give to that very mother ship. This accomplishes four important purposes:

1. Communicates to the Corinthians their indebtedness to apostles and believers who have gone before them.
2. Solidifies their mutual belonging and investment with churches across the Mediterranean.
3. Surely validates Paul's mission in the view of those pillars and founders in the Jerusalem church.
4. Most importantly, the Jerusalem and Judean churches were poorer than the Macedonian and Greek ones. Paul tilts the lucre toward the churches that need it most.

This communicates across the ages to us, of course. Even the most brilliant church, with splendid programming and a growing congregation, is not God's end-all and be-all. Denominations, as threadbare as they are and as much as they've been chided for being a vehicle of division between Christians, have tried to remind us that we belong to and are responsible to one another across space. We can celebrate the confederacy that is Christianity, now a billion strong, but still not great at seeing that we belong to one another.

See? All that from a paragraph you might have skipped out of disinterest.

Paul's News...and Example

Any time my son Sam, raised on National Public Radio, hears someone tell him what time it is, he blurts out what naturally follows: "...and the news is next." Paul has saved his own news 'til the very end, and it's only his travel plans. Here he sounds a lot like us on a phone call or e-mail, as we catch people up on our lives. "We'll go to my folks' house in July and hopefully see John and Margaret while we're there..." For Paul, though, nothing is trivia. No sight-seeing for him. Notice the purposefulness that anchors his plans:

- ❖ Until Pentecost at least, he'll stay where he is, in Ephesus, "for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." (16.8-9)
- ❖ Macedonia is next, where he has churches to visit in at least Philippi and Thessalonica, and probably Berea.
- ❖ Corinth for the winter, if all works out, because, as the letter indicates, he has a whole lot more to teach them and help them become.

Perhaps even more striking than Paul's purposeful ways is his care for his teammates.

- ❖ He hopes to send Timothy to Corinth, so he runs interference in advance: "If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am; ¹¹therefore let no one despise him. Send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I am expecting him with the brothers." (16.10 -11)
- ❖ He updates them on the leader they count as Paul's rival for their affection, Apollos, assuring them that he (Paul) would be glad for Apollos to return (no jealousy here!), but Apollos does not wish to embark. (16.12)

Even when reporting this mundane news about his calendar, Paul seems keen on modeling the mutual caring and other -orientation that he has been trying so hard to drum into them.

In fact, with his next breath he'll show them a couple of other poster boys for deference to community called Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, three of their own who have probably delivered their letter to Paul. (1 Corinthians 7.1, 7.22; 8.1; 12.1)

¹⁵ Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; ¹⁶ I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. 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. So give recognition to such persons.

Close

Paul closes the letter as I would like to close our Yale Bible Study journey with you: with a charge and a blessing. We've walked a long way together, through the ups and downs of an ancient relationship between pastor and parish, leader and community. You have been inquisitive, appreciative, and faithful and you have hailed from a wild and wonderful array of churches across the U.S. and beyond. As we finish the series, I find myself ultimately very grateful. So I close our grand journey through Corinthian Christian lives with my adaptation of Paul's strong words:

¹³ Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love...

¹⁹ The churches of New York and New England send greetings. Eric and Vince and Lois and Gabriel send love; the churches of Arizona and Minnesota and California chime in, with Carol and Judy and Marty and Bob; the Mid -Atlantic says hello from Reggie and Julie and Nick... All the churches greet you warmly in the Lord. ²⁰ All the brothers and sisters send greetings. Wherever you are, greet one another with a holy kiss.

²¹ I, Allen, write this greeting with my own MacBook.... Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.

Amen! And Amen!!!