

# Paul's understanding of death according to 1 Corinthians 15

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## Summary:

*Unquestionably, the doctrine of the resurrection is a foundation without which the Gospel message loses its purpose. However, the Corinthian epistle is an example that the message of the Gospel can be neglected. It happened to the church in Corinth because of the strong influence of the surrounding society. In this rich correspondence Paul's approach is that of a spiritual father who worries about the condition of the church in Corinth. He writes from his own experiences and knowledge about the resurrection in order to bring them to soberness and to restore their ways of thinking. This article is a reminder of truths that are necessary for the life of believers and which can be found in Scripture. At that time, and because of the challenges of contemporary ways of thinking, the truth about the resurrection can be neglected. That is why this article should be observed as a reminder of primary components of the Christian faith.*

Key words: *Corinthians, Resurrection, Faith, Pharisees, Sadducees, Greek philosophies, Death, Body*

## Introduction

Believing in the resurrection is one of the main postulates of Christian faith. Even though there were discussions about the resurrection before the coming of Jesus Christ, resurrection gains a whole new meaning with Him. He becomes the firstborn of the resurrected. After Christ, talking about resurrection is additionally

deepened through the preaching of the apostles, which is particularly the case with the apostle Paul. In chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians we find a comprehensive deliberation on the subject of resurrection.

In this article we will present Paul's view on the resurrection according to 1 Corinthians 15, and we will go on to explain how this chapter came to be. We will be researching the resources which were probably used by Paul to form his own view of the resurrection, as well as his personal experience of encountering the Risen One. If he had been taught the doctrine of the resurrection as a Pharisee, then the encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus was an event that transformed his own personal faith the most, as well as his understanding of the resurrection. His view on the resurrection also needs to be seen from the standpoint of Judaistic thought, which is the foundation of Paul's understanding of the resurrection, as well as the influence of Greek philosophy and its understanding of the afterlife.

## **Origins of Paul's talk about the resurrection**

### **Personal encounter with the Risen One and the witness of the apostles**

Even though, as a Pharisee, Paul did have a certain understanding of resurrection, it was additionally deepened through encountering the risen Jesus. On his way to Damascus, Saul the Pharisee meets Jesus, and his life is changed, and so is his name. Paul meets Jesus in the form of a blinding light and a voice coming from it (Acts 9:1-18). This encounter leaves Paul blind for the next three days. After this encounter, Paul turns from a persecutor of Christians into one of their friends and allies in preaching the Gospel, indeed one of the most fervent followers of Jesus ever. In this encounter, Paul recognizes the reality of Jesus' resurrection, and for him Jesus becomes the firstborn of the resurrected (1 Cor 15:20) and the image, or an example, of the resurrection which will happen to others as well.

Paul's faith in Jesus' resurrection is additionally strengthened through his acquaintances with the other apostles. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 he speaks of the "traditions" which he received, and he then lists the witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. It is obvious that this tradition was begun in the fellowship between the first Christians, who have summarized the main factors pertaining to Jesus and the Christian faith. At the end of the list of witnesses Paul puts his own name, affirming that he also stands in the line of veritable authorities in preaching the Gospel.

## The Old Testament

In Jesus' day, talking about resurrection was part of everyday life. Every Jew knew even then that the doctrine of the resurrection was widespread. The Christian author N. T. Wright is convinced that the talk of resurrection began in the period between the Maccabee crisis and the writing of the Mishna, around 160 BC.<sup>1</sup> This is the period when Wright thinks the book of Daniel was written which, unlike the other OT books, speaks more emphatically about the resurrection. Together with Daniel 12, there are other OT references to the resurrection as well, such as Job 19:25-27, Hosea 6:2, Ezekiel 37:1-14, as well as the deuterocanonical book of 2 Maccabees 7:11 and parts of the Mishna (Mishna 10.1.) (cf. Wright, 2003, 129).

It is evident that there was a misunderstanding regarding the talk of resurrection in Jesus' time from the fact that the two major religious groups in Israel disagreed on the matter. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the body as stated in the book of Daniel, while the Saducees discarded this possibility. They based their rejection of the notion of resurrection on their exegesis of the Pentateuch, which was the only OT Scripture they acknowledged, while rejecting the rest.<sup>2</sup> We can read about their non-belief in the resurrection in Lk 20:27, Acts 4:2 and 23:6. Joseph Flavius wrote about them that they believed that the soul perishes together with the body (cf. Wright, 2000). And really, we find no talk of the resurrection in the Pentateuch. According to Genesis 1-3, for human beings the exile from the garden of Eden meant the loss of God's immediate presence and the experience of punishment, which was death. We still find no mention of any existence after death. According to Genesis 1-3, it is man's fate to "return to dust."

The term used later in the Pentateuch to describe the condition of the dead is "sheol". It represents the dwelling place of the dead, where the dead sleep. According to the Pentateuch, it is located beneath the ground (Num 16:30-34). It is entered through death (Gen 37:35), and even living persons can descend into it (Num 16:30-34). And true, the Pentateuch allows for the possibility of calling

- 1 Not agreeing with Wright would mean accepting an earlier date of the writing of Daniel, which is 6th century BC. If we accept the idea that the notion of resurrection was developed as early as 6th century BC, there is the question of why would the latter OT authors of books written after Daniel mentioned nothing of it, especially due to the importance of the issue for the life of believers of the day. As evidence to the later authorship of Daniel there are writings which were written during the Maccabee period (2 Mac 7:11) and portions of the Mishna (Mis 10:1).
- 2 Since they held religious and political power, it is possible they had opportunistic reasons for rejecting the idea of resurrection, because for them it would mean a change in the existing order where they stood on the top.

the dead back from sheol, but such practice is abominable before God and it is forbidden (Deut 18:10-14). Saul will go on to break this ban upon his attempt to get in touch with the deceased Samuel (1 Sam 28:3-25).

The characteristics of sheol which are in line with the Saducees' beliefs are also found outside of the Pentateuch. For example, we can find them in Ecclesiastes, where it says that there is nothing left after this life is over: "...There is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going... There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean... For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward..." (Eccl 9:10; 9:2-5).

Unlike the Saducees, the Pharisees believed in the existence of life after death, and they believed that after death comes resurrection (Acts 23:6). Furthermore, they believed in the existence of the transcendent spiritual world in which spirits, angels, and demons resided. Their belief in the resurrection is described by Joseph Flavius (2.8.14) with the following words: "The soul does not disappear; the soul of the righteous man is transported into another body, while the soul of the unrighteous man is punished with eternal torment." However, Flavius is wrong in putting the emphasis on the immortality of the soul, because for the Pharisees the key emphasis was on the resurrection of the body based on the Messianic hope, the hope which is not mentioned by Flavius. As far as Paul is concerned, he belonged to the Pharisees, (Acts 23:6; Acts 26:5; Phil 3:5) and had already believed in the resurrection. However, in his encounter with Jesus this idea is additionally deepened through the historic event of Jesus' resurrection.

### **Influence of Greek thought on Paul in the context of the Corinthian church issue**

The influence of Greek thought on the notion of the afterlife was not unknown to Paul. First of all, Paul's epistles were written in Greek, which means that Paul probably knew the basics of writing in Greek, which is evidenced by the language, style, and structure of his epistles. His epistles do not differ in structure and style from most letters that circulated in the Greek world.

Furthermore, Paul knows the Greek intellectual background very well. In Athens, he meets with Epicureans and Stoics (Acts 17). On a number of occasions he quotes various Greek authors, which implies he had also read their writings (Tit 1:12, 1 Cor 15:33, Acts 17:28), and he warns against the dangers of "philosophy" (Col 2:8, 1 Tim 6:20, 1 Cor 1:20). And even though in some of his epistles Paul warns against the dangers and futility of philosophical thinking (Col 2:8; 1 Cor 1:19-24), on some other occasions he adapts it to the point he is trying to make (Acts 17:28, 1 Cor 9:19-23).

When it comes to resurrection, Paul is aware that the philosophies of the Greek world have a different view of the afterlife. In Greek thought there are conflicting ideas about the afterlife. According to Plato, the soul is the immaterial aspect of the human being, and it is immortal. It has existed before the body, and it will continue to exist after the body is gone (cf. Wright, 2003, 49). Epicurus on the other hand discarded the possibility of the survival of soul and body after death. He sees the talk about death and the possibility of punishment in the afterlife as the cause for irrational fears in man, which are to be rejected so that one can live freely and without fear. Epicurus said: "Therefore death, this vilest of all evils, can do nothing to us, because when we are, death is not here, and when death comes, we are no longer." (cf. McCulloch, 2011). The Stoics do not offer a precise view of the afterlife. Since they held a pantheistic belief, according to which God is the soul of the world and that it shares its common entity with all other living creatures, they did not support the idea of personal immortality (cf. Stoicism).

Regardless of various views, however, we can conclude that the role of the body after death was devalued in Greek thought. Even though the body had a purpose during life, death meant the cessation of its role. That is why only the soul remains in Hades<sup>3</sup> after death. Even though they differ on some points, the Greek philosophies do agree on one thing, which is that it is impossible to resurrect a dead body<sup>4</sup>. And yet this is Paul's main argument. Paul was convinced that the resurrection of the body is possible—furthermore, that the role of the dead body is to provide a foundation for the future resurrection. Unlike Paul, some people in the Corinthian church were not standing firmly on the apostolic faith. However, it is difficult to recognize which particular Greek philosophical idea influenced the issue in the Corinthian church. As Richard A. Burrige (cf. 2014, 140) points out, there is an ongoing debate among theologians about whether Corinthians generally rejected the idea of life after the physical life, or did they believe that they were already living the resurrected life, and what understanding did they have of the nature of the human body in the present and the future.

3 Hades, ie. Aides or Aidoneus in Greek, was the ruler of the underworld, the god of death and the dead. He presided over burial ceremonies, and if the ceremony was not performed properly, he would forbid the burial. The name of the god Hades was later used to denote the dwelling place of the dead. There is no punishment nor reward in Hades after death.

4 According to some sources, the Greeks were able to accept the notion of the resurrection of one or several powerful individuals, but not the general resurrection of all people (cf. Endsjø, 2009, 150-152).

## **1 Corinthians 15**

### **The context of writing 1 Corinthians 15**

Among all Paul's writings, his correspondence with the Corinthian church is textually rich, and it contains a richness of Paul's theology. This is primarily due to the fact that the Corinthian church was one ridden with many issues, but they were also a congregation for which Paul had almost paternal feelings. Had it not been for their stubbornness and disunity, we would have probably been denied a good portion of Paul's theological thought.

Their problematic condition probably stems from two important, but not exclusive factors which need to be taken into account when making a judgment about them. The first factor was that they were a young Christian community, and the second was that they belonged to a very colorful society, brimming with various views. Being a seaport city, Corinth was fertile ground for various kinds of influences, and is often mentioned as an example of utter debauchery. In line with this, Paul is forced to single out those beliefs and practices which are not in accordance with the Gospel, and which were causing problems in the church community. Internal divisions and quarrels occurred in his absence as well. However, Paul believes that he has the right to address these issues in the Corinthian church, because he considers himself to be their spiritual father, who is responsible for the founding of the Corinthian church.

One of these theological and practical issues was the issue of resurrection. The problem with the resurrection, as stated in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, lies in the fact that Paul wanted to teach and remind the Corinthian church about the belief in resurrection as the foundation of Christian faith, without which the believer loses his faith. He has become forced to do this because of some problematic individuals who were questioning the fact of the resurrection. According to Paul, without resurrection the Christian preaching and Christian faith are without foundation. That is why he believes it is important to warn the Corinthian believers against being wavering in regard to the confusion introduced among them. That is why we will now address the arguments offered by those who rejected the resurrection, as well as Paul's teaching on the subject.

### **Arguments offered by those who questioned the resurrection**

In chapter 15, the problematic individuals are not mentioned specifically. We do not know if those were the same people whom Paul mentioned previously in the

epistle as trouble-makers. What we do know for certain is that there were some of those in church who were opposing the belief in resurrection. The entire 15th chapter was in fact Paul's apologetics on resurrection, but also an exhortation to those who had been confused by various rumors. Paul states that the problematic group does not even know God (15:34).<sup>5</sup>

To eliminate the element of resurrection from faith is to destroy the belief. And that is precisely what the problematic group was doing with its claims. In verse 19 Paul warns that we should not only trust Christ for this life, for it if were so, he would have been the most miserable of all people. Furthermore, if there is no resurrection, then we are free to „eat and drink“, which in this context refers to free behaviour (v. 32b). The problematic individuals in the Corinthian church were convinced that death is the end of man's fleshliness, and that talk of resurrection is meaningless. Carl Holladay lists some of the possible reasons for their disbelief in the resurrection: (1) there is no resurrection, because after death there is no life in any form; (2) there is no resurrection of the dead, because only those who will be alive at the time of Christ's second coming shall be raised; (3) there is no resurrection of the body because the corpse will not be brought back to life, instead, the immortal soul will continue to live; (4) there is no future resurrection, because resurrection had already taken place (cf. Holladay, 1984, 196-197). And indeed, some of Paul's other epistles do speak of similar thoughts (1 Thess 4:13; 2 Tim 2;18, etc.).

Paul gives special attention to their rejections and sarcasm in regard to the risen body. They demonstrate this with the question of what kind of body those who are resurrected will have (1 Cor 15:35). They may have been burdened with the knowledge of the fate of those whose bodies have been dismembered, or those who were burned, so they wondered if they will be raised in such a condition (cf. Holladay, 1984, 207). Or maybe they, like the rabbis, were wasting time wondering whether those who have lived to be 100 will be centennials in eternity as well. We do not know. What is certain is that, upon reviewing the issue of the risen body, they preferred adhering to the interpretations offered by philosophical worldviews<sup>6</sup> which they belonged to, rather than the apostolic teaching. Paul categorizes such questioning as deceitful (v. 33) and foolish (v. 36), because it is God who gives the resurrected body the form He wishes to give it (v. 38).

5 Paul's phrase in 1 Cor 15:34, "for some have no knowledge of God", implies that more than one person was involved in spreading rumors against resurrection.

6 Even though it is difficult to state which views would those be. For a better understanding of Greek worldviews, go back to the chapter dealing with the influence of Greek thought on Paul.

## Paul's arguments for the resurrection

There are three key arguments which Paul uses as a response to this problematic group in the Corinthian church.

***The Gospel is carried through the apostolic tradition (15:1-11).*** The Scriptures, along with the apostolic tradition, are the foundation for speaking about Jesus Christ. By "Scriptures", the apostle Paul implies those portions of the Old Testament which refer to the Messiah, ie. Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> The Scriptures confirm that Jesus was supposed to die for our sins, that He was buried, and that He was risen on the third day. This is the message of the Gospel which Paul preached in Corinth, and which was accepted there. It is probable that verses 3-8 are part of the Christian creed formulated by the first church, especially lines 3-4.<sup>8</sup>

In Scriptural tradition, Paul lists those who have had an encounter with the Risen One. Firstly, it is Peter<sup>9</sup> and the apostles. This is the second reference to Peter's name in 1 Corinthians. It is certain that some Corinthians considered Peter to be important (1 Cor 1:12), maybe even a greater authority than Paul (1 Cor 1:10-17). After He has shown Himself to Peter, Jesus also appears to the Twelve,<sup>10</sup> then the brethren, the five hundred of them,<sup>11</sup> then James,<sup>12</sup> and finally Paul him-

7 Even though Paul was not specific as to which Scriptures he was actually referring to. One of the more trustworthy places which refer to the Messiah, the Christ, is the passage from Isaiah, the song of the Lord's Servant (Is 53:1-12). Barker and Kohlenberger also include Ps 16:8-11 (cf. Barker & Koglenberger, 1994, 650). Adalbert Rebić (1999, 64) considers these Scriptures to be passages such as Hos 6:2, Jonah 2:1, 2 Kings 20:5.

8 Most NT scholars agree that verses 3-4 belong to a line of earliest Christian creeds, while there is some disagreement regarding verses 5-8. Rebić (1999, 70) believes that verses 6b-8 demonstrate how Paul did not consider himself obligated to use the creed literally, but to include it freely in his version of the Gospel proclamation.

9 Paul does not mention women as witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, even though the Gospels say they were the first to see the risen Jesus (John 20:1-18). He does not think that their witness is relevant to verifying the authenticity of talking about the resurrection.

10 Barker and Kohlenberger (1994, 650) hold that Paul's usage of the phrase "the Twelve" is emphasizing the importance of the apostles, not so much as the actual number of them, particularly when considered that Judas had not been present with them, and Thomas was also absent on one occasion (John 20:24).

11 Again, there is no mention of the women who were witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. In the Gospels there is no mention of these 500 that Paul is referring to. It is possible that the 500 were the ones whom the apostle John refers to as "the disciples" (Jn 20:19), or those that Luke the Evangelist mentions (Lk 24:16). Maybe Paul just wanted to emphasize the existence of numerous witnesses who are able to verify the authenticity of the Gospel message.

12 Jesus' appearance before James is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament. This James is probably Jesus' half-brother (Mt 13:55; Jn 7:5; Acts 1:14). He went on to become one of the leaders of church in Jerusalem (cf. Wright, 2003, 325). The New Testament does not explain



self.<sup>13</sup> Based on Scripture and the apostolic tradition, Paul considers himself to be an authority to be taken into account.

**Christ's resurrection is connected to the resurrection of the dead (15:12-34).** Paul sees the resurrection of Jesus as the main evidence for justifying the talk of resurrection. It seems that the problematic Corinthians had no problems accepting Jesus' resurrection, because Paul writes that they had already received the Gospel, part of which is a message of Jesus' resurrection (15:1-11). However, if they have accepted the resurrection of Christ, Paul reminds them that they also need to accept the future resurrection of those who have died while believing in Christ, as well as of those who will be transformed at the sound of the trumpet (15:53).<sup>14</sup> We do not trust Christ for this life alone, Paul goes on (15:19). Paul does not explain how it is that Corinthians first accepted the Gospel, and then got confused about it. During Paul's absence did they fall under some external influences in their thinking—or is it that maybe they never really understood the Gospel message properly—is difficult to tell. What is crucial about Christ's resurrection is that Jesus is the *firstborn* of the resurrected. Through Christ, the possibility is open for all of the dead to be risen, just like death entered the world through Adam, and it affected all people. And if Christ rose from the dead, then the time will come for all those who have died in Christ to be raised from the dead as well.

**Role of the body, and the final resurrection (15:35-58).** The importance of the body in Paul's talk about the resurrection is of indisputable importance. When Paul writes about the resurrection of the dead, he does not divide the role of the body into a good or a bad one. Maybe such a division would suit the problematic Corinthians more, because it would help promote their point. When he speaks of resurrection, Paul rather uses two opposites which are connected together, because he uses the metaphor of the seed which brings forth a certain "form", which is established by God. As much as these two forms may be opposite (celestial vs. earthly; corruptible vs. incorruptible), it is an undeniable fact that they are closely linked. Instead of perceiving the body as a prison for the soul, Paul sees it as a seed which will bring forth something greater and better. Leon Morris (1984, 209) writes that, "just as God intended for us to have bodies which

how James became a follower of Jesus. Paul singles him out because he was one of the most important church leaders in Jerusalem.

13 Paul views himself as a premature infant. The phrase in Greek, "ekromati", means "to be born at a wrong time". It is possible that Paul is referring to the way he became Jesus' follower, or to the fact that he was not present in Jesus' ministry during His lifetime. That is why Paul considers himself to be the least among the apostles (1 Cor 15:9).

14 It is interesting that Paul demonstrates the belief that he will be alive at the time of "parousia" (similar to 1 Thess 4:13-18).

are suitable for life on Earth, he has also intended that we have bodies suitable for the heavenly existence.”

Those who will experience the ending while still alive will be transformed in the blink of an eye (v. 52) at the sound of the trumpet, but it is interesting that Paul, although writing about the ending (v. 24) of that which is corruptible, makes no mention here of the “Day of the Lord”, “the Coming of the Lord”, or some other phrases which are suitable for talking about the end of the world. Paul’s primary topic is talking about death and resurrection. The trumpet will mark the end, and the end comes when the final enemy, ie. death (vv. 25-28) has been defeated. After this, everything will be subjected to God, who will be all in all.

## Conclusion

Through this brief article which deals with Paul’s view of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 I wanted to emphasize the importance of believing in resurrection as the basis for the entire Christian belief, because the Gospel without resurrection is no Gospel. Even before he encountered the *Risen One* on his way to Damascus, Paul had already been familiar with the doctrine of resurrection as a Pharisee. However, after his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul’s interpretation of OT Scriptures gained a new and different dimension. From then on, Paul believed that Jesus was the firstborn of the resurrected and, after he began his ministry, together with the other apostles he proclaims Christ the Crucified, but also Christ the Risen.

The issue of the Corinthian believers who had rejected the resurrection seems relevant to this day, because it speaks of and reminds us of the importance of the doctrinal integrity of the Christian faith. If you take something away from it, everything else falls apart. The troublesome group in the Corinthian church demonstrates what happens when we move our eyes away from the Gospel and when we start listening to and accepting the trends of the culture and the times in which we live. That is why I thought it would be helpful to use the example of Paul’s concern and watchfulness over the Corinthian church, in which he reminds them of the *substance* of the faith they have received. Paul’s warning to the early church is just as important for believers in the 21st century church.

Although the resurrection remains one of the mysteries which are difficult to fully understand in this life, Paul’s teaching about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 remains the “means” and the conviction with which we are to accept the reality and necessity of death, but is also a reminder that death is not the end of human existence, and that there is much more to our walk with Christ than what we presently have in this life.

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## **Pavlovo razumijevanje smrti prema 1 Korinćanima 15**

Sažetak

Neupitno je da je doktrina o uskrsnuću od mrtvih temeljna komponenta bez koje Evanđelje gubi svoju vrijednost. No korintska korespondencija jedan je od primjera da se poruka evanđelja može zanemariti. U Korintskoj crkvi to se dogodilo zbog utjecaja društva kojem su pripadali. U ovu bogatu korespondenciju Pavao ulazi kao duhovni otac zabrinut zbog stanja u Korintskoj crkvi. On unosi sve svoje iskustvo i znanje koje je stekao o uskrsnuću ne bi li ih doveo otrežnjenju, te obnovio njihovo mišljenje. Ovaj članak je podsjetnik na one istine koje su dostatne za vjernički život, a koje se nalaze u Svetom pismu. Kao i nekada, i pred današnjim izazovima suvremenog društva istina o uskrsnuću može biti zanemarena, zato ovaj članak treba uzeti poput svojevrsnog podsjetnika na primarne značajke vjere.