

I Corinthians 15 The Life-giving God

Introduction

One day you and I will not be here, but in eternity. Are you prepared for that certainty? One day at either a crematorium or a cemetery someone on duty at a service will commit your earthly remains to be buried or cremated, but the Bible teaches very clearly that this is not the end. One of the forms of committal words I may use at a funeral service is as follows: 'Seeing that the earthly life of our sister /brother has come to an end we commit his/ her body to be buried / cremated, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, **confident of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.**' This is the foundational Christian conviction that following in the footsteps of Jesus who died, was buried, who rose again and ascended into heaven, we too one day will join Him and those who have gone before us in God's new created world. It is not only a modern belief. Christians over the last two thousand years have held similar beliefs.

The Nicene Creed adopted in 325AD at the Council of Nicea, and slightly revised later, included these words about Jesus: ...was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and **the third day He rose again**, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, **to judge the quick and the dead**; whose kingdom shall have no end. Another popular creed used in the Early Church in shorter forms was used possibly in the second or third centuries, but in its current form from 390AD, was the Apostles Creed which included these words: was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. **On the third day he rose again**; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and **he will come to judge the living and the dead**. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, **the resurrection of the body**, and the life everlasting. Amen. The creeds or statements of faith in use were never intended to be exhaustive statements of theological convictions, rather as summaries of some essential foundational convictions. The reality of the bodily resurrection – that beyond this life we will gain a new perfect body that will be like Jesus' resurrection body is a gift from our life-giving God. Let us look briefly at two passages in the New Testament that speak about this topic.

1. The foundation of our faith (I Corinthians 15:3-8)

(a) **The Christian's responsibility** (I Corinthians 15:1a) *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance*: there was significant variety of practices in the Christian Church in the first century AD, but there were also some core convictions and practices that all accepted, whether Jewish or Gentile followers of Jesus. Here is one of the core doctrinal statements with respect to the Easter message that Paul had learned as a young Christian disciple. In I Corinthians 11:23-26, in the passage on the observance of the Lord's Supper, there is similar language indicating that Paul had been instructed in this matter at an earlier time: ***For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'*** ²⁵ *In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'* ²⁶ *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.* Our calling is not to utter original thoughts on the Christian faith, but as faithful ambassadors of Jesus to proclaim what we have received from the Scriptures through those who have disciple us over the years. The gospel of our life-giving God is unchanging from generation to generation, but how we explain and express may differ from culture to culture and from generation to generation, though the core content must never be changed. Am I as a Christian faithful to the gospel message I have been entrusted with?

(b) **The fundamental truth** (I Corinthians 15:1b-4) ... *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* ⁴*that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...* What is the core message that Paul is passing on here? He begins by using a specific title for Jesus. *Christ* is a title, 'the Messiah', or the 'Anointed One'; or 'God's chosen King'. Paul will still declare interchangeably that: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again...* (I Thessalonians 4:14a), but in that very same passage in relation to our future bodily resurrection declares that: *the dead in Christ will rise first* (I Thessalonians 4:16b). He continues to explain the purpose of Christ's death that it was *for our sins...* clearly language that echoes the language Isaiah 53:12b: *For He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.* Or earlier in Isaiah 53:5: *But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.* The substitutionary nature of His sacrifice in our place is abundantly clear. However, Paul's use of the phrase *according to the Scriptures* is not necessarily referring just to a few particular passages; it is more likely a reference to the whole Scriptures they possessed at that time. The life-giving God keeps His word. Then the apostle deals with the fact that Jesus actually died- a fact that the Gospels narrate that it was confirmed to the satisfaction of the Roman Governor Pontus Pilate before Jesus' body was sealed in the tomb (Mark 15:43-47). Then he records the greatest day in history with the bodily resurrection from the dead on that first Easter Sunday. Again, the phrase *according to the Scriptures* is used. Almost certainly this is viewed as a fulfilment of Psalm 16:9-11: *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,* ¹⁰*because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.* ¹¹*You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.* Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost confirms that this is the case in Acts 2:24-28). Our life-giving God in the person of Jesus has conquered the power of death. Because He lives, we shall live also – for ever!

(c) **The apostolic witnesses** (I Corinthians 15:5-8)⁵ *and that He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.* ⁶*After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.* ⁷*Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles,* ⁸*and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.* Over the years sceptics have raised all kinds of questions about the resurrection. Yet the evidence would have stood up in any court of law. A Jewish court required two eyewitnesses. Paul declares there were more than five hundred of them! The Gospels record that the first eyewitnesses were women (Mark 16; Matthew 28; Luke 24 and John 20). Given in that culture that the evidence of a woman was not accepted in court as valid testimony, it is clear that this would only have been recorded as a matter of historical fact. It certainly did not advance the cause in the eyes of Jewish sceptics. However, so many men also were eyewitnesses that in practice the case was incredibly strong and almost certainly was crucial in many Pharisees coming to faith in Jesus. What is remarkable is that even in the circles of those religious leaders associated with the Temple services there were professions of faith in Jesus. In Acts 6:7 Luke records: *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.* Our faith is securely based on the facts of that first Easter. Have you placed your faith and trust in Jesus as these people did? This is the most important choice you can ever make.

2. The significance of our faith (Acts 17:22-31)

We have the most important message that the world needs to hear with respect to what Jesus accomplished two thousand years ago on the cross and in His death and resurrection. However, it is not only for us, because other people desperately need to hear it for themselves as well. Notice how Paul responded to an invitation to address a gathering of philosophers in Athens.

(a) **He perceived a need** (Acts 17:22-23) *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.* He began where they were in an attempt to get them on side. He did not have a go at them for their superstitions and idolatry. Paul wanted to win the people more than the argument. This is a crucial distinction for all of us. Paul has also done his homework in Athens, prior to his public speaking engagements. He has noted that amongst the altars of familiar gods there was one worshipped who had no name. He took the trouble to find out why. The story relates to an earlier period of the city's history when it was suffering from the plague. Epimenides, a 6th century BC Cretan hero, was invited by Nicias, a citizen of Athens, to advise the city how to get rid of it. The Athenians assumed that a god was angry with the city and had sent the plague as a punishment to them. However, they did not have a clue which one was offended and needed urgent assistance to resolve their dilemma. On his arrival in Athens Epimenides obtained a flock of black and white sheep and released them on Mars Hill. He instructed a team of men to mark the spots where the sheep sat down –next to the altars of various gods. If a sheep sat down next to an altar he believed that the god in question was offering to assist them if a sheep was sacrificed on its altar. It is assumed that the sheep had been kept without food for a time so that in the time when they were released it was to be expected that they would rush around searching for grass, rather than sit down. A number of the sheep rested and were then offered as sacrifices on unnamed altars. The plague ceased and the city's population was delighted, but none the wiser as to which god or gods had helped them. Therefore, to be on the safe side the altars of existing gods were maintained and it appears that several others were erected 'to the unknown god', at least one of which had survived to New Testament times. In 175 BC Greek travel writer Pausanias wrote in his work, *Tour of Greece*, that he had visited Athens and reported exploring numerous temples and 'altars of the gods named Unknown' [John Stott, *Acts*, p. 284]. Greek writer Plato in his book, *Laws*, added further information about this remarkable man from Crete. He wrote: Epimenides who was revered as a prophet predicted that in ten years' time from the date of his message the mighty Persian army would invade Greece and reach Athens, but return home defeated. It was a prophecy that came true. Plato also interestingly refers to Epimenides as 'an inspired man' and credits him with being 'one of the great men who helped mankind rediscover inventions lost during 'The Great Flood' [Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, pp. 9-20]. Paul had learned the history of this unusual altar and said I know the God who delivered your city from the plague. He had captured their interest in a legitimate way, enabling him to gain a hearing for the gospel.

(b) **He picked a starting point** (Acts 17:24-29) Paul had indicated to these people that he was familiar with their culture and beliefs and by linking his message with the altar to the unknown god has engaged respectfully with their religious history prior to setting out the differences he has with their world view. (i) **God the Creator of the Universe** (Acts 17:24) *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.* For Paul the doctrine of God as creator and His care of His creation is

central to his preaching with pagan Gentiles. The apostle needed to set boundaries to explain his understanding of God and the interaction by God in the lives of the people He has made. He begins, in line with Genesis 1:1, to state, contrary to the Epicureans, that the world is not a cosmic accident that happened by blind chance, nor is God confused with His creation like the Stoics, instead the One who stands outside creation brought it into being by the word of His power. No image of Him in a place of worship is adequate to represent His likeness, nor is He dependent on us for anything. In their hearts most people know that they are not here by chance and that their life has a purpose, even if they are struggling to find it. (ii) **God the Sustainer of Life** (Acts 17:25) *And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.* He is taking care of His world. Humanity has damaged the environment and lived in a way that undermines the self-sustaining natural resources of planet earth. The rest of creation knows its place; humanity is the one creature that has overstepped its boundaries. God, though, is not dependent on us. He has everything He needs in Himself as the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but willingly provides all that we need to enjoy a good quality of life. He is the life-giving God. The more we learn of its intricate details, the less credible is any notion of our world coming into being by chance. God is active in His world and engaged with the lives of the people and other creatures He has made. The absent God or gods of the Epicureans is a pointless one; the god of the Stoics is a lifeless one; but the God of the Bible is altogether different. He is sufficient in Himself without fellowship with us, yet takes pleasure in our worship of and obedience to Him. In fact God designed the universe and in particular the planet on which we live with exactly the right conditions so that life as we know it is possible, whereas on every other planet known to us, because different conditions are found, we would be unable to live there with the ease of life on earth. (iii) **God the Ruler of the Nations** (Acts 17:26-28a) *From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.* ²⁷ *God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.* ²⁸ *'For in Him we live and move and have our being.* All humanity is descended from one original male and female ancestor—a reference to Adam and Eve—implying that racism against your relatives is absurd! How long has it taken for humanity even to begin to eradicate racism? The fact that in the past some people who claimed to be Christians could be racist is absurd. For the atheist who proclaims the survival of the fittest and the superiority of some races over others, for example, as Hitler did, is understandable. Our equality as persons before God, regardless of gender, race or social status, is proclaimed loud and clear in the Bible. Galatians 3:28 states: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* This is why it was no accident that international aid relief efforts in disaster zones around the world began in historically Christian countries, and why to this day these countries give considerably more humanitarian aid than Muslim or Communist states. Slavery, for example, was first abolished in the British Empire, due to pressure from Christians, whereas Islam has never taught the equality of persons before God. In that context the Arab race, language and culture is superior to all others. (see Nonie Darwish, *Cruel and Usual Punishment* for a vivid description of life under sharia law) God has ordained varieties of cultures and nations for us to enjoy and appreciate. Yet with this purpose, that we should acknowledge Him and come to put our faith and trust in Him; Paul bluntly spelt out this truth in his letter to the Romans and explained that the evidence for intelligent design by the Creator is plain to see for anyone with an open mind to see it. He wrote: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* ¹⁹ *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are*

without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:18-21). However, says Paul, don't just take my word for it, one of your own scholars, Epimenides, the 6th century BC poet from Cnossos in Crete, wrote: *For in Him we live and move and have our being...* Acts 17:28 (Stott, *Acts*, p.286). Another early Cretan poet, Minos, also used these words in a hymn to his father God Zeus (I.H. Marshall, *Acts*, pp.288-9). Paul in effect declares that they got it right in the sentiments they express, but not with reference to a Greek god! It is the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth who rules over the nations. Yet that is not all-

(iv) **God is the Father of Humanity** (Acts 17:28b-29) *As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*²⁹ *Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone— an image made by man's design and skill.* Once again Paul in that pagan context quotes not the Bible, but the works of scholars known to and respected by his audience. In this case it is Aratus, a third century BC Stoic poet from Paul's native Cilicia in Turkey, who is quoted by the apostle (an earlier Stoic poet Cleanthes also used these words, Marshall, *Acts*, p.289) to make his point that idolatry is wrong as an inanimate object cannot portray the living God. Paul in this quotation was well aware that this old Stoic poet was referring to his own god Zeus, rather than the creator of the universe God himself. However, the concept was right and he acknowledges this point and wants to point his hearers to the true God. In terms of creation we are all God's children and receive numerous natural blessings in daily life. However, in redemption God is only the father of those who have been redeemed through Christ and adopted into His family by grace alone, through faith alone. God our father has been good to us in granting all the good things we experience, but we must make a response to Him in return. Once we know of our need to trust Jesus Christ we must act upon it.

(c) **He pointed to the solution** (Acts 17:30-31)³⁰ *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.*³¹ *For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men **by raising him from the dead.*** God is the Judge of all the world. Our responsibility is to heed His call to follow Him. The person who has never heard of Jesus will not be condemned eternally for not believing in Him. But they are accountable in the light of what they know of God and His standards in their conscience. Romans 2:12-16 addresses this point: *All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.*¹³ *For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*¹⁴ *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.*¹⁵ *They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, **their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.**)*¹⁶ *This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.* Everyone will one day be judged in the light of the knowledge of God and His standards that they possessed. We cannot see into someone's heart, but God can. Paul declares that God has given us dignity and responsibilities for our actions in contrast to the Stoic viewpoint. God will judge all our conduct –opposing the Epicureans. In Galatians 6:9 Paul warned his readers: *Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant.*⁸ *Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit (NLV).* Have you made your peace with your maker? Have you committed your life to Christ?

3. The necessary response of faith (Acts 17:32-34)

*When they heard about **the resurrection of the dead**, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'* ³³*At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others* (Acts 17:32-34). The reality is that God has given us a choice to make as our response to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Years ago I remember explaining the evidence for the fact of Jesus' death and resurrection and the person in question responded that I had probably shown that these events happened then, but I hadn't convinced them that what happened then required a response of faith from them now. Each person has the responsibility to make their choice. What happened that day in Athens is no different to today? What is your response to Jesus? If there is life after death as the Bible asserts and the events that follow are as described in Holy Scripture then we need to be right with God by putting our faith in Jesus. But how can we get right with God and meet Him as our saviour rather than our judge? Paul explained this in Romans 3:25-26: *God presented Him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished* ²⁶ — *He did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* Belief in a suffering Saviour who was raised from the dead challenged Greek philosophers at the core of their beliefs. For them the body was evil and something we mercifully leave behind after this life. This point was made in one of the best known plays of Greek writer Aeschylus [535/4-456/5BC] - 'Eumenides'[Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, lines 647-8]. A character- the god Apollo- in that play declared: 'Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.' They think it's all over –but in raising Jesus from the dead, as prophesied in the Old Testament, God had the final word. It is not all over- far from it. The best is yet to come. Our life-giving God has planned for us beyond this life a quality of life that is beyond anything we have experienced here as believers. I trust that He is your Lord and Saviour who will carry you beyond the grave to your eternal home, for Jesus' sake, Amen.