

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who sleep

1 Cor 15:12 Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 *But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.* 14 *And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty.* 15 *Also, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified against God that he raised Christ from the dead, when in reality he did not raise him, if indeed the dead are not raised.* 16 For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless; you are still in your sins. 18 Furthermore, those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. 19 For if only in this life we have hope in Christ, we should be pitied more than anyone.

1 Cor 15:20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The first letter to the Corinthians begins with an intense reflection on the paradox of the cross (1:18-25). It concludes with a profound reflection on the resurrection (15:1-57). In between many practical issues (ethics, sacraments, social issues) are addressed. In this way, Paul indicates that all of Christian life is to be viewed within the parameters of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, cross and resurrection. Of all the Jewish writings from the period on resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15 is the fullest and most consistent exploration of resurrection as such and on how to imagine the risen body.

KIND OF WRITING

It may help to repeat the structure from last week:

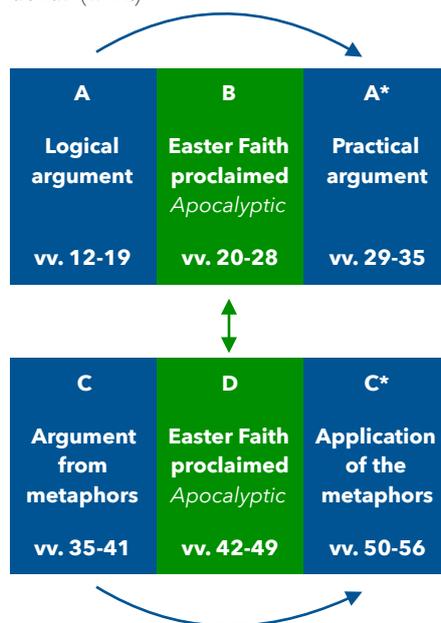
Introduction vv. 1-2 The tradition
Statement of Facts vv. 3-11 Witnesses
Thesis I v. 12 No resurrection?
Proof I v. 13-24 Logical follow-through
Thesis II v. 35 What kind of body?
Proof II vv. 36-56 Using imagination
Conclusion v. 57 Final exhortation

Hence our reading comes from the first proof, starting with the thesis and then skipping forward to v. 20. It might be a good idea to include the omitted verses.

The overall argument in 1 Corinthians

15 can be “mapped” as a matching pair of diptychs or panels. Arguments A and A* resemble each other, as do arguments C and C*. The internal B and D arguments — no longer logical but apocalyptic — also resemble each other.

Each argument is motored by a “thesis”. The first thesis is in the form of a question: Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? (v. 12)



The central arguments are really not arguments as such but proclamations of faith conviction, expressed in the appropriate language of Jewish apocalyptic. Thus, Paul abandons Greek logic, which takes you only so far. With such mapping in mind, it is clear that our reading has the substance of A (the logical argument) combined with just the very start of B (the apocalyptic proclamation).

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Some in the community really do believe that Jesus is risen but cannot see that the dead too are raised in Christ. Their slogan seems to have been “there is no resurrection of the dead.”

RELATED PASSAGES

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him. For the death he died, he died to sin

once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you, too, consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:8–11)

Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 Paul cites the slogan of those who do not think the dead are raised in Christ. The argument is: are you sure you want to say there is no resurrection at all? This would undermine the faith completely.

Verse 13-15 Paul draws out some of the unpalatable consequences of saying there is not resurrection *whatsoever*. The logic is relentless, even inexorable.

Verses 16 This is the kernel of the argument. In Jewish apocalyptic imagination, resurrection is a *communitarian* event, for *all*, at the end of time. The idea that there could be a resurrection for one person only would make no sense at all to an apocalyptic Jew like Paul.

Verse 17 That is, there has been no victory over sin and death.

Verse 18 Notice the language of falling asleep (temporary) — to be picked up immediately in B and later in A*.

Verse 19 Precisely because we have been fooling ourselves, living a delusion.

Verse 20 The image of first fruits suggests that Jesus is the beginning of the whole harvest. Asleep is important: just as I am the same person when awake and asleep (though in different modes), likewise there is continuity between who I am now and how I will be in the future.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. If I did not believe in the resurrection, what would be the consequences for how I live?
2. How much is hope for the dead part of my own faith in Christ? Imagine of that hope were taken away...?

PRAYER

God of the living: for you, all are alive. In the gift of Jesus raised from the dead, our hope of immortality dawns. Help us to live in the light of that hope.