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Why Jesus' Resurrection Matters - Part 1

By Tal Davis

In the Spring of every year, Christians the world over celebrate Easter. Ironically, that term is not found in any ancient New Testament texts. It appears once in the King James Version in Acts 12:4 when King Herod planned to execute Peter “after Easter.” The Greek word there is *Pascha*, meaning “Passover,” as all modern translations correctly translate it.

So, we might wonder, how did “Easter” become the English name for Resurrection Sunday, the most important celebration on the Christian calendar? Some trace it back to a pre-Christian Spring celebration of a goddess named Eostre or Ostara. That may explain why pagan symbols are often associated with Easter including bunnies, colored eggs, and baby chicks. Somehow, possibly because of the closeness in time, northern European Christians adopted the name Easter for the Passover season. Other historians speculate differently about its origins. In any case, it stuck. So “Easter” is now the common term for the day set aside to remember Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

In this two-part special series, we will examine Paul’s important discussion of the Lord’s resurrection found in 1 Corinthians chapter fifteen. In this chapter, Paul makes the case for the fact of Christ’s resurrection and the practical and eternal implications it has for His followers.

The ancient city of Corinth was located in Greece at a narrow neck of land connecting the Peloponnese peninsula and the Greek mainland. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and, in New Testament times, was a major center of commerce. Earlier, in 146 BC, the Romans ransacked the city. Julius Caesar, however, in 44 BC, reestablished it as a Roman colony of “freedmen” and a major crossroads for trade and pagan religions. Corinth also hosted the famous Isthmian Games every two years (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Paul came to Corinth about AD 50 boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. He started with the Jewish community, but also preached to the Gentiles (Acts 18:1-8). Consequently, Corinth became one of the foremost churches in the New Testament era. The other leading Christian centers were Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria, and Ephesus. Paul ministered in Corinth for eighteen months along with other key leaders including Aquila, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Apollos, and Titus.

Eventually God called Paul to leave Corinth. Soon thereafter, he received reports that serious problems were brewing. 1 Corinthians, written from Ephesus about AD 54, was actually Paul’s second letter to this church – the first having been lost. In it, Paul answered questions and addressed the crises. One major issue was the skepticism of some as to whether or not Christians will be raised from the dead. In what is now chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, Paul determined to settle that question once and for all. We will start by looking at verses 1-3.

1 Now I make known to you, brothers and sisters, the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received, in which you also stand, 2 by which you also are saved, if you hold firmly to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-3 NASB)

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians what it was he had preached to them when he was there. He is again making known to them what they never should have forgotten, that is, “*the gospel*.” The gospel is the *euangelion*, the good news or message that was the focus of all Paul had preached and taught throughout his time in Corinth. He reminds them that they had heard it and received it.

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Paul also says, not only did they believe it to be true, they now “*stand*” upon it. They are depending on it like one standing on a secure rock. So Paul expresses confidence they were holding firm to their beliefs, despite the problems and the doubts of some in the church.

Verses one and two are intended to be read together in a sort of parallel structure with the gospel at the center. Paul states (vs. 1) he had *preached* (past tense) the gospel to them. He says they were now (presently) standing on it. Because of his proclamation of the gospel, they were now secure. Likewise, (vs. 1) he says since they had received the gospel, they are now in the process of being *saved* (vs. 2) – that is, their salvation was not yet completed. They still live in the fallen world. Salvation is simultaneously a present and future concept.

Paul then implores them to *hold firmly to the word* he left with them. If what he had taught was invalid, as some in Corinth apparently claimed, then they believed in vain, without purpose or meaning. In such a case, a possibility in which Paul in no way entertains, the gospel was nothing but a lie.

So, just what was this “*gospel*” or good news that Paul was so compelled to preach and teach. What was the “*word*” he expected them to hold fast? He lays it out (vss. 3-8) quoting what was probably a very early statement of faith circulating among the believers at that time. Paul lets them know that what he passed on to them, which was *of first importance*, was what he himself also received.

The gospel was not something Paul made up or conceived in his own mind. He received the gospel by revelation from God and from personal interactions with Jesus’ disciples – including Peter, James, and other apostles. Around AD 35, only about three years after his conversion, Paul traveled to Jerusalem. There he conferred with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. James had been skeptical of his older half-brother’s claims, but eventually came to believe and became the leader

in the Jerusalem church. Paul interviewed the apostles to make sure what he believed and was teaching was doctrinally and historically sound.

Fourteen years later he returned to Jerusalem to again confirm he was on the right track, particularly preaching to the Gentiles. This time he met not only with Peter and James, but also John. Thus, with their corroboration, Paul was confident that what he was preaching was the unfettered truth. (Gal. 1:11 - 2:1-10).

At this point, Paul delineates the clear content of the gospel he received and was preaching. As we noted, he likely cites a previously composed statement of faith that expounds in a chronological pattern the facts of the gospel message.

Paul starts naturally with the initial phase of the story (which they should already know). The first basic tenet of the gospel is that “*Christ died for our sins*.” “Christ,” of course, refers to Jesus of Nazareth. “Christ” is the Greek form of “Messiah” - the Anointed One whom the Jews expected to come. The fact Paul called Jesus by that title indicates he recognized His divine nature. Later it became virtually a part of His name: Jesus Christ. “*For our sins*” means that Jesus willingly acted on our behalf (for) as a substitute to pay the price of atonement for our sins. Jesus was the only person qualified to die for others’ sins.

Sins (*harmartia*) are those thoughts and acts of rebellion against God Himself. Jesus taught it was a condition of the heart (Matt. 15:18-20). Sin manifests itself in numerous ways: unbelief; disobedience of the Law; immoral behavior; and, perhaps most significantly, in rejection of God’s invitation for life in Christ.

Paul also makes it clear that Jesus’ death was no accident. It was “*according to the Scriptures*.” The Messiah’s suffering was foretold in the Old Testament. Just exactly which passages Paul means is not stated, possibly those establishing the sacrificial system. More likely he was thinking of the “Suffering

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Servant" of Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. In any case, Paul declares the death of Christ was part God's sovereign plan for mankind's redemption.

4 And that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:4 NASB)

In verse four, Paul addresses the real heart of the matter. After stating that Jesus died for our sins, he then confirms it in an absolute sense. Jesus was really dead. He was so dead that "*he was buried.*" In ancient Jewish culture dead bodies were regarded as ritually unclean. Anyone touching a corpse was required to go through a ritualistic cleansing to be restored to religious purity. As a result, bodies were buried as quickly as possible after the death to prevent the impurity from affecting more people. Usually the interment was done within twenty-four hours, especially in the case of an execution (Deut. 21:23) as with Jesus.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus' body was made ready for burial with aromatic oils and spices. He was also wrapped in a linen cloth (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 19:39). Tombs were usually caves hewn out in the side of hills or were dug out of the ground. Often families had tombs reserved for their dead over generations. Jesus was necessarily placed in a tomb borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) who was a secret follower of Jesus (John 23:50-51). The fact that the creed Paul was quoting mentioned the burial attests to the reality and finality of Jesus' death.

This flies in the face of critics who assert that Jesus never really died. Many skeptics say he faked his death so as to enhance His prestige when He supposedly was raised. Others contend He was only sleeping. Some speculate that He swooned or was in a trance or hypnotic state which His disciples mistook for death. Muslims believe Jesus was not crucified at all. They maintain He was a holy prophet – only one of hundreds. But as a prophet, God would never allow Him to have died such a humiliating death on a Roman

cross. So, they say, someone else was substituted for Him. All of these theories ignore the record in Scripture and the eyewitnesses who were there at the cross and the tomb. Actually, most modern scholars, even those who question Jesus' resurrection, acknowledge that He indeed died and was buried.

So Jesus was dead and buried. If the plot had wound up at that point, Christianity would have been just another odd religious movement long since forgotten on the ash heap of history. But the story does not end there. Paul proceeds to present the next, and certainly most important, dimension of the gospel message he had received: Jesus "*was raised on the third day.*" The Greek term, "*was raised,*" that Paul uses (*egegrtai*) is a perfect passive verb. That means Christ not only was raised, but He is still alive now. God raised Him from the dead by His power, and the resurrection remains operational.

Again Paul asserts, just as he had with Jesus' death, that the Scriptures had foreshadowed Christ's resurrection. Though the statement of faith does not identify what passages Paul referred to, he may have had Jesus own words in mind. He had stated that in three days the temple would be destroyed but it would be built again. John says Jesus was talking about His resurrection after three days (John 2:19-22). Mark quotes Jesus several times predicting that the Son of Man (the Messiah) would suffer and then rise again after three days (Mark 8:31; 9:31, 34). Jesus also had alluded to the story of Jonah being in the belly of a fish for three days as a type of His resurrection (Jonah 1:17; Matt. 12:39; Luke 11:29-30).

The keynote to this part of Paul's statement can be understood in three points: 1) Jesus died, but He is not dead; 2) He was buried, but He is not in the grave; and 3) He was raised and is still alive today! Jesus' resurrection is the bedrock of the Christian faith. Though Christ taught many great moral lessons, all of that is moot in comparison to the critical nature of His

resurrection. But how can we be so sure it actually happened? What, if any, objective evidence do we have for the resurrection? Maybe it is just a myth. Maybe the Gospel writers all got it wrong? In the next section we will cross-examine, as Paul likely did, some of those who claimed to see the risen Christ.

5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Perhaps you have had opportunities to talk to people who have witnessed significant historical events. Many people still living were present on D-Day, saw the assassination of John Kennedy, heard the Beatles in concert, or went to Woodstock. Several astronauts who walked on the moon remain alive. It is for sure that anyone who was an eyewitness of those and other important occurrences will attest that they really happened. They were there. They saw and experienced it firsthand.

Beginning in verse five, Paul provides a catalog of people he knew and interviewed who claimed to have actually seen Jesus Christ after His resurrection. These were eyewitnesses who could attest that He had appeared to them in bodily form. For Paul, this was the definitive evidence that all he had said before was absolutely true! How do we know? Because Paul says that the risen Jesus “*appeared*” or “*was seen*” (*ophthe*) by a number of objective witnesses.

Using a sort chronological roll call, Paul lists those to whom the Lord appeared beginning with *Cephas*. Cephas (Aramaic: *Kephas* meaning “Rock”) was Paul’s usual appellation for Peter. Several different names are used in the New Testament for Peter: Simon (Acts 14), Simon Peter, and Cephas. Cephas is used only one time outside of Paul’s writings (John 1:42). Simeon (Hebrew) or Simon (Greek) was his given name. Jesus later gave him the moniker “Peter” (Greek: *Petros*) meaning “the Rock” (Matt. 16:18). He was often credited as the de facto leader of the twelve disciples. This was despite his tendency to speak and act badly, as when he denied the Lord three times (Mark 14:66-72).

The next group Paul mentions is “*the Twelve*.” This was a title used only here by Paul. It referred generally to the group of men who were specially called by Jesus to be His disciples. His reference to the number Twelve does not mean there were always twelve present when Jesus appeared. Judas had deserted them before the resurrection and Thomas was not present when Jesus first came to the group (John 20:24). In any case, the fact that these special apostles supplied their personal testimonies to the resurrection was vitally important.

Paul then makes a highly audacious claim in verse 6. He says that Jesus had “*appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time!*” The sheer number of this band of witnesses was sure to impress even the most skeptical doubter. Paul does not supply any names of these people or when and where the event occurred. It may have happened in Galilee where the risen Lord went to meet the disciples and issue the Great Commission (Matt. 28:10-20). Paul states honestly, and perhaps with a bit of sadness, that some of the 500 had “*fallen asleep*.” It had been twenty years or so since the event happened. “Sleep” was a common figure for physical death (John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:51). However, to add weight to this reported sighting, he says that most of them were still alive at the time of his writing. Thus, if anyone doubted Paul’s word they could find that living majority to verify it for themselves.

Then, in verse 7, Paul mentions by name a specific and very important witness to the resurrection. *James* was the Lord’s half-brother (Matt. 13:55). He and his other siblings were not believers in Jesus during His earthly ministry (John 7:2-9). (This James should not be confused with two of Jesus’ disciples, James, the son of Zebedee, or James, the son of Alphaeus.) At some point after the resurrection, James had a drastic change of mind. We are not told in the Scriptures exactly when the risen Lord appeared to James, but he was soon found among the company of believers and became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:14; 15:13-21).

James’ conversion carries great weight in Paul’s argument for the reality of the resurrection. As a skeptic, he would not easily be persuaded. It required some powerful encounter to change James’ perspective on his older brother. The resurrection was obviously that experience. Perhaps James, and the others in his family, after seeing the risen Lord were reminded of the things He had told them and were convinced it was all true.

So Paul had listed a powerfully convincing list of witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. But for Paul himself, those testimonies were not really necessary. He had himself seen the risen Lord in person. He now makes that fact known to the Corinthians (though they likely already knew). He says, “*Last of all...*” This could mean of least importance, but more likely he meant last in time after the others.

However, before Paul states his testimony, he makes a puzzling interjection. He says, his seeing Jesus was “*as to one untimely born*” (*ektromati*). The Greek term literally means an “abortion” or a “miscarriage.” English Bible versions

render it in various ways: “as of one born out of due time” (KJV), or “abnormally born” (NIV). Each of these translations take Paul to mean his experience of seeing Christ was most unusual. Some interpreters assume he was talking about the time lag between Jesus’ appearances to the others relative to the lateness of his own experience. Other readers surmise that he was expressing a humble, non-deserving, attitude about himself, since his life prior to conversion was one of persecuting the church.

Regardless, Paul finished by saying, “...*He appeared to me also.*” Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus as he was going to persecute the believers there (Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-13; 26:12-18). As a result, he became a zealous preacher of the gospel and the founder of many churches. It was by the amazing grace of God, not only that Paul was saved, but he was an apostle of Christ. He had preached the gospel of Christ risen to the Corinthians, and they had believed (1 Cor. 15:9-11).

In Part 2 of this two-part series, we will look at what Paul says in this chapter is the important consequences of Jesus’ resurrection for our present lives and for our future.

Resource:

Habermas, Gary. “The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus” in Evidence for God - 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science. William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona, Editors. Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2010. pp. 173-174

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