THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:12–34

Key Verse: 15:22

“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”

In preparation for Easter we’re studying the resurrection chapter in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15. Many people emphasize the death of Jesus on the cross. But as Christians we also need to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and understand what it means to us personally. In today’s passage Apostle Paul continues his explanation of the resurrection and says we’re all either in Adam or in Christ. In Adam we all die, but in Christ we all can be made alive. It’s not just an old story from long ago, nor something far in the future. Christ’s resurrection power is actually still at work in the practical life of every believer. Today we mainly want to think about what it means to be “in Adam” or “in Christ,” and how we can experience his resurrection power as we live in the real world. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

In verses 1–11 Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians of two historic facts, the death and resurrection of Christ, as the good news for all people. He also listed many witnesses who actually met the Risen Christ in person, including himself. In light of this, Paul now addresses another serious problem in this church. Read verse 12. Some people were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead. Why would they be saying that? The resurrection is never easy to believe, because it’s not something we ever see. But some of these Corinthians had a problem with it because, as Greeks, they didn’t believe people’s bodies would be resurrected after death. They thought the afterlife is something that involves only the soul. This is what Greek philosophers taught: the soul is the real person, imprisoned in a physical body, and that at death the soul is finally released. The body perishes but the soul enters an eternal state. Actually many people today, even some Christians, still think like this. But Christianity teaches that both body and soul will be united at the resurrection. Today it’s popular to pick and choose what to believe, based on what’s trendy or based on our feelings. But the resurrection of the body is not a matter of opinion or personal preference. The resurrection is a core Christian teaching. In fact, we can’t have Christianity without the resurrection. Why? Read verse 13. Paul repeats this again in verse 16. These people denying the resurrection were probably not denying the resurrection of Christ—they just hadn’t thought things through. Underneath it all, they were probably denying the resurrection because they were enjoying the world’s pleasures and treasures in their rich city of Corinth. So Paul tells them the resurrection of the body is directly related to the core of the gospel, the resurrection of Christ.

In verses 14–19 Paul goes on to describe what the world would be like if Christ had not been raised. First of all, it would be a world in which death reigns: Christ himself died and is no more, and everybody else, without exception, dies, too. No one is ever raised, which means there’s no real hope for the future. What a bleak world—where death ends everything! Death still makes life feel utterly meaningless. Paul goes on to say that without the resurrection of Christ, all Christian preaching and faith would be “useless.” Gospel messengers would all turn out to be lying about God. (In fact, people denying the resurrection are the ones lying about God.) God the Father with his almighty creation power raised Christ from the dead, and he promises he will raise all who believe in him also. In verse 17 Paul again mentions that without Christ’s resurrection our faith would be “futile,” and he adds that we would still be in our sins. This tells us that Christ’s resurrection validates his atoning death for our sins. Because Christ rose from the dead, we can be sure that our sins are forgiven. Even when we fail again and again, Christ who rose from the dead is our Advocate with the Father (1Jn2:1,2). He’s at the right hand of God interceding for us (Ro8:34). But if he died, there’s no solution to our sins and no help to get us out of them. Read verse 18. There have been so many beautiful people who followed our Lord Jesus’ example, suffered, and even died for him. But if they all just died and are no more, then it was all for nothing. Read verse 19. We do have hope in Christ for this life. Through faith in Christ we experience forgiveness. Through faith in Christ we gain power over our sins. Through faith in Christ we can enjoy life to the full (Jn10:10). But we also have hope in Christ for life after death, because he promised that one day he will come back and take us to be with him forever. If this hope isn’t real, we’re the people most to be pitied. Why is that? It’s because as we follow Christ, we participate in his sufferings. We’re hated, rejected and persecuted just as he was. We make sacrifices for his sake. We live humbly and poorly like he did. We give our lives serving others. But if we just die like everyone else, we look like dummies, with no real purpose and no reward.

Read verse 20. In Greek the word “now” is there; it literally says, “But now Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.” It means that Christ’s resurrection is a fact, not a philosophical idea, and his resurrection has now changed everything. Now there’s hope for the future, now there’s a reason to believe, now there’s a reason to preach, now there’s forgiveness of sins, now there’s a reason to follow Jesus and suffer for him. Now there’s a reason to rejoice in all things, because Christ has been raised from the dead. Paul adds that Christ’s resurrection was “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” He calls Christ “the firstfruits” again in verse 23. “The firstfruits” is a powerful image with deep spiritual meaning. In agriculture, the firstfruits are what is produced first, before the full harvest. The firstfruits may seem small, but they suggest the nature and the quality of the crop to come. When farmers see the firstfruits, they can take heart that all their hard work of planting and nurturing was not in vain, and they can wait patiently for what is surely about to happen. Likewise, we can think of the Risen Christ as the firstfruits of our own resurrection, and of all who believed in him down through history. Because Christ is the firstfruits, in everything he has the supremacy (Col1:18).

Let’s read verses 21,22. Here Paul compares Adam with Christ. Death came into the world through one man Adam. Likewise, the resurrection comes into the world through one man, Jesus. With this repeated parallel Paul is trying to help these people to see how reasonable it is to believe in our resurrection through the resurrection of Jesus. Through Adam we all inherited a sinful nature, we remain dead in our sins spiritually, and we all have to die physically. But through Jesus we receive grace that covers over all our sins and wakes us up spiritually, and someday we will receive a glorious resurrection body. Through his resurrection Christ began a new humanity and a new history. Through faith in Jesus we are changed from rebellious, disobedient people who are a bad influence, to obedient people who follow the example of Christ and bring God’s blessing to the world (cf. Ro5:15–18).

Let’s read verse 22 again. The key word here is “in.” In Adam we all die, but in Christ all will be made alive. What does it mean to be “in Adam”? It means to live according to our sinful nature (Ro8:13). It means to live to please our sinful nature (Gal6:8). We should not deceive ourselves; anyone living according to the sinful nature is living “in Adam” and will reap the fruit of death. Then what does it mean to be “in Christ”? Apostle Paul loved to use this term “in Christ.” We are “in Christ” when we have faith in Christ (Ro3:22). Paul puts it best in Romans 6:3–5: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” To be “in Christ” means to count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Ro6:11). It means to struggle in our daily lives not to offer the parts of our bodies to sin, but to offer ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (Ro6:12,13). As we keep on living in Christ, we are “made alive.” Before, we were dead in our sins, and we followed the ways of this world and the rebellious spirit of the devil, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. But God in his great love and mercy makes us alive with Christ, by his one-sided grace, and we become truly humble. We also find ourselves as God’s handiwork, created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph2:1–10). When we are made alive in Christ, we find our life’s real meaning and purpose. So the power of Christ’s resurrection is the power to wake us up spiritually and really change us. This gives us great hope for ministry. Sometimes people seem absolutely closed to the gospel message. But in Christ anyone can be “made alive,” including even someone like Apostle Paul who persecuted the church of God (9). We need to hold onto faith in the power of Christ’s resurrection which can change even the most impossible person.

But “made alive” in Christ also ultimately refers to our future resurrection. Paul wrote back in 6:14, “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.” In fact, our Lord Jesus himself told us, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn11:25,26) The power of death is very strong. It can make anyone sorrowful and fearful. But the power of Christ’s resurrection gives us victory over the power of death. The founder of The Navigators, Dawson Trotman, heard the news that his younger brother Roland suddenly died in a tragic accident. Roland was hiking with his fiancée when her foot slipped, and to save her, he pushed her to safety while he plunged to his death. But just a few weeks beforehand, Roland had finally accepted Jesus as his Savior and Lord. So his brother Dawson applied his faith in the Risen Christ to this grim reality and became sure that his brother was with the Lord and that he would see him again someday. We all need this eternal hope in the Risen Christ, both for ourselves and for those we’re praying for.

In verse 23 Paul describes the future resurrection like this: “But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” He’s emphasizing the orderliness of the resurrection. Why? Back in the previous chapter Paul had rebuked this church for their disorderly meetings (14:26–40). In their spiritual immaturity some people were insisting that they always go first, speak first, eat first, come first. Paul wanted them to know that even at the resurrection Christ comes first, and then those who belong to him will be raised.

Read verse 24. This shows us the tremendous power of Christ’s resurrection. One day with his resurrection power Christ will destroy all dominion, authority and power in this world that oppose God. It’s the power that enables him to bring everything under his control (Php3:21). The world is opposed to God and rebellious to his rule. But the power of the Risen Christ will abolish all this rebellion. Read verses 25,26. With his resurrection power Christ will put all his enemies under his feet, in total submission, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 110:1. Even death, our last enemy, will be destroyed. Why do we need to know this? As we see all kinds of evil and injustice and cursed things going on in the world, we can become so discouraged and depressed. We need resurrection faith to believe that the Risen Christ is now reigning, despite what the world looks like, and he will win the final victory over it all, including death itself. In verses 27,28 Paul again emphasizes the orderliness of God, who put everything under Christ, and who will receive the kingdom from him. Christ’s humble subjection to the Father is our example.

In verses 29–32 Paul shows how else resurrection faith impacts our daily lives. With resurrection faith we can risk our very lives for the gospel of Jesus. We can fight spiritually against all kinds of opposition with God’s hope. We can resist the pleasure-seeking philosophy of the world. Then Paul gets very direct with them. Read verses 33,34. Those who live without resurrection faith are bad company. They are also ignorant of God. We need not to be influenced, but to influence others by the power of resurrection faith.

Read verse 22 again. May God make us alive with Christ through faith in his resurrection. May he give us hope for ministry that in Christ all can be made alive. May we have faith that the Risen Christ is reigning now and will come again and bring us back to his eternal kingdom.