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1 Corinthians

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 1 Corinthians 15:9

In explanation of his previous verse where he said he was "born out of due time," he now notes that "I am the least of the apostles." He wasn't claiming this in gifts received, work-effort put forth, or rank and status. He was an apostle equal to the others, he notes in 2 Corinthians 11 that he labored more than all the others, and he is noted throughout Acts and the epistles as having an overflowing abundance of the gifts of the Spirit.

What he is referring to is his deserving of respect and honor. His calling was out of the order of the other apostles and without prior education by Christ. He felt that because of this he was "not worthy to be called an apostle." Specifically, during that time of spiritual darkness, he not only wasn't neutral to the gospel, but he actually "persecuted the church of God." His persecution of the church is noted in Acts 8 and 9, but he gives great detail of what this constituted in Acts 26 -

"This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*.¹¹ And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities." Acts 26:10, 11

He also mentions those areas of his life which he felt disqualified him from any esteem in his epistles, and he never seemed to quite forgive himself even though

the Lord had washed him clean of all of his transgressions. Or it could be that he simply didn't want to forget his past, lest he exalt himself above other sinners in need of a Savior. It could even be that he reminded himself often of his past so that he would never fall back into his old ways. Whatever his actual thoughts, he carried his past with him and he spoke of it freely.

Life application: All in Christ "have a past." Some are "worse" than others, but James notes that one infraction of the law breaks the whole law. Therefore, we all stand guilty before God without the shed blood of Christ. Let us cling to this notion, not exalting ourselves over others, and in the hope of never returning to a life of sin. Let us live for Christ, exalting Him for His infinite grace and mercy.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God *which was with me.* 1 Corinthians 15:10

Previously speaking of his state of unworthiness as an apostle, Paul now shows the attention that he committed to the high honor that was bestowed upon him. He went from a persecutor of the church to a staunch defender and supporter of it. The cause of Christ became his sole passion (even his soul-passion) and desire. And so to show this contrast between his past and who he had become, he begins with the words "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

His conversion was solely "by the grace of God." He was on his way to Damascus to persecute the church, and on the way there the Lord appeared to him personally. There was nothing he did to deserve it. He was looking to destroy the notion of the Lord, but instead the Lord lavished His grace upon him in a personal appearance and calling. He could have been destroyed, but the Lord mercifully spared him.

And not only had the Lord spared him unto the calling of an apostle, but Paul notes that "His grace toward me was not in vain." Grace which is taken for granted will be displayed in wasted effort. If you give a sluggard a thousand

dollars (grace), it will be spent by the end of the day on useless things which will be in the garbage by the weekend. But if you give a thousand dollars to a diligent, energetic person who will strive to make a better life for himself, that same money will turn into a business, a home, education for his children, and an inheritance for his family.

The sluggard will soon be back, asking for more; the diligent soul will be back to repay what was given and to acknowledge your goodness to him. The Lord knew the man He was selecting and He knew the great and effective ministry he would produce. And so Paul was selected. In response to this act of grace, he notes that "I labored more abundantly than they all."

All of the other apostles had been granted their title and ministry while Christ was alive. Though undeserving of their title, just as Paul was, they had grown into it and were comfortable with it. Paul, on the other hand, had it almost thrust upon him. He understood the weight of glory which had surrounded him and he knew that he could never repay the grace and mercy he received. And therefore he labored in a way that no other did. He who rightly perceives the grace he has received will show gratitude for it. Paul was such a person.

And yet, despite laboring with all of his effort for the cause of Christ, he was humble enough in his heart, and wise enough in his mind to proclaim that it was "not I, but the grace of God *which was with me.*" Every breath a man takes is by the grace of God.

The gifts we possess are all grace. Paul understood this and used his past experience, his make up, his knowledge, and every part of who he was to work for Christ. It was all of grace and therefore it was all Christ. The selection was made and Paul understood what that meant. He notes this several times in his writings. A good example is to be found in Colossians –

"To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." Colossians 1:29

Life application: Can we boast about what we have received? Certainly not! And yet how often we do. Let us credit the glory to God in all things that we accomplish for Him. Let us exalt Christ who so effectively works in us for His good purposes and pleasure.

Therefore, whether *it was* I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

1 Corinthians 15:11

Paul begins verse 11 with two conjunctions, "Therefore, whether." The "therefore" covers all the way back to the first verses of the chapter which said -

"Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain." 1

Corinthians 15:1, 2

After that, he gave the pertinent points of the gospel message; the same message which is preached by all the apostles. It is these words which were preached and it is those same words that were believed by the Corinthians. Therefore, having believed, they are truly saved. Their belief was not grounded in a false gospel, but the true gospel, and their faith is not in vain.

This then explains the often-confused concept of verse 2. It is that verse which people incorrectly assume can mean a "loss of salvation" is possible. The reason is because they look at the verse out of context. The entire context of these first 11 verses shows us that this is not the case, but that salvation is eternal. If one believes, they *are* (emphatic) saved.

The word "whether" refers to the party who spoke the message - either himself or one of the other apostles. It didn't matter which, it didn't matter how they became apostles, it didn't matter whether he was once a persecutor of the

church, etc. Regardless of those issues, the message spoken was the same as from any or all of the apostles.

The word Paul uses for "preach" in this verse is *kerusso*. There are different words used in the Greek which are translated as "preach." Of them, one indicates "to prophesy." That would be a spiritual instruction or exhortation. Another would be to evangelize. This word in verse 11 means "to proclaim." It indicates the stating of the facts of the message of the gospel. Paul has "proclaimed" them to those in Corinth and they are in unison with the proclamation of the other apostles. It is the one, only, true, and saving message; it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Life application: Verse 2 of 1 Corinthians 15 took many surrounding verses to understand correctly. When citing individual verses, context must be maintained. If it is not, then a false understanding of what is being relayed may occur. In this case, salvation is conditioned upon belief in the true gospel message. If that message is heard, received, and believed, then it saves the one who believes... for all time!

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 1 Corinthians 15:12

Paul has clearly presented the gospel message concerning Christ. It is this same message which was "believed" by those in Corinth. The purpose and effect of this preaching takes us right back to his earlier words that it is the gospel "by which also you are saved." A moment later he said, "unless you believed in vain." Salvation implies more than just this life. It implies something which transcends this life. If it doesn't, then his coming words in verse 19 are all the more poignant - "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable."

In this gospel message which they believed, and which he reiterated to them, is the fact "that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." His words here repeat this thought by saying, "Now if Christ is preached that He has been

raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

What he is surely referring to here is that some in the church denied that there would be a resurrection of the dead. These were probably either Epicureans, who denied any sort of future life, or another group known as the Stoics who denied a physical, bodily resurrection. Instead they taught that a future life was spiritual in nature. Paul's words now, and in the verses to come, will logically dispel such nonsense. They will also show the consequences of such a notion.

In order to show them the utter folly of this, he tells them that the message that was preached, and which they believed, already demonstrated that there had been one example of a literal, bodily resurrection; that of Jesus. He went to great lengths to show that not only did it occur, but that it was witnessed by a large list of people, thus confirming the surety of the matter. If there was one such resurrection, then it naturally followed that there would be more.

The premise of calling on Christ is that the individual moves from fallen Adam to the risen Christ. If we are in Christ, then we will follow him from death to life. It is the logical and natural outcropping of the matter. This will continue to be explained in detail throughout the chapter.

Life application: What God does is logical and reasonable. If "the wages of sin is death," and if Christ had no sin, then death could not hold Him. If we are "in Christ" and our sins are no longer counted against us, then we too must rise to eternal life as well. It is impossible to be any other way. Don't have doubts, but have full confidence in the surety of eternal life - all granted because of the work of God in Christ!

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

1 Corinthians 15:13

"But" is given as a contrast to what was just said, "Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Those in the church who denied a literal resurrection of the body had not thought through their faith very well. If there is no such thing as a literal resurrection, then it must logically follow that Christ didn't literally resurrect either. If He did, and we move to Him as our Head by faith, then we are "in" Him and we will naturally resurrect when the fullness of time comes for that to occur.

Also implied in this verse is that the Apostles, and all of the others noted as having seen the resurrected Christ, are either liars or delusional. Paul said that "Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead." This is based on the eyewitness testimony of that noted list given in verses 5-8. However, "if there is no resurrection" then the testimony that Christ resurrected is false. If it is false, then what on earth are people doing in church?

The resurrection is wholly and inextricably tied to the sinless death of Christ. If there was no sinless death, then there was no resurrection. If there was a resurrection, then there must have been a sinless death. One cannot have one without the other. If one is false, they are both false. If both are false, then there is no gospel and there is no true church. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!"

Life application: Don't let people cause your faith to be diminished by fine sounding arguments. The doctrines of the Bible are perfectly revealed in the Bible and show a perfect plan given by the perfect Creator. If you have a doubt about one of the primary doctrines of the faith, then research it while praying for God to lead you to competent scholars with knowledgeable commentaries on the issue you are struggling with.

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty. 1 Corinthians 15:14

In the next few verses, Paul will state explicit consequences for us if Christ didn't actually rise. If He did, there is one result, but if not there is another. His coming words are to be taken soberly. And they must also make us question the sanity of those who sit in churches and yet deny that Jesus did, in fact, rise.

What he will say then is a *reductio ad absurdum*, or an "argument to absurdity." "If Christ is not risen" begins the thought. "What if this is the case?" "What would be the result of such a truth?" "Where would that leave the apostles?" "Where would that leave you?" The answers will flow from his pen with almost a sense of mourning at the state of despair which would then result. "If Christ is not risen, then..." The word "then" is intended as a forceful statement of irony which conveys the idea of "such it would be" or "after all."

If so, "then our preaching is empty." All of the effort of the apostles, any hope or comfort they have imparted, any trials they have faced in spreading the word about Jesus, and so much more... all of it is vanity and without any substance. If the words of the apostles could be seen as they came forth from their mouths, those same words would melt in the air as they were uttered, disappearing back into nothingness. This is the result of Christ not having risen. The words would have no value whatsoever.

But more than just the apostles' words, the believers' "faith *is* also empty." It would mean that the entire story presented was pointless. Who cares at all if a person named "Jesus" lived in the land of Israel and went around doing good stuff? Who cares if such a person healed others, told interesting stories, and claimed to be the Son of God? And so what if this person was nailed to a cross? If there is no resurrection, then all that was accomplished is just another story of man, like any other story of a man who has existed.

There is no hope in man. Every great leader who ever lived eventually died, and with him went everything that he was - right back to the dust. If Christ did not rise again, then the dust would have reclaimed him as well. Think it through! Why would anyone go to church, even once, if the resurrection isn't true?

Life application: Jesus Christ did rise and our hope is not in vain. We look to a blood stained cross, but an empty grave. Because of Jesus, it is literally impossible that His followers could remain in the grave. It is more certain that we will be resurrected than it is that the law of gravity would suddenly cease to exist.

Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 1 Corinthians 15:15

Not only would the preaching of the apostles be found empty, which would in turn mean that the faith of those who heard and believed be found empty, but moreover it would demonstrate something even deeper and more sinister - that the apostles "are found false witnesses of God." The word for "found" implies "proven to be." It would not be a mistake in their preaching and teaching, but rather a proof-positive that there was an intentional hand of deceit involved. Why? Because Paul has already claimed in the preceding verses that all of the apostles had seen the risen Christ.

Thus, should someone have checked his story (for example, by searching out some of the 500 mentioned in verse 6), and determined they were lying, then it would be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had "testified of God that He was raised up, whom He did not raise up." Imagine the severity of the charge! This isn't just a lie about who ate the cake that was being saved for dessert. Rather, this would be a lie about the truth of God himself. The severity of the charge would be against not just Paul, but all of the apostles. It would show an intricate conspiracy that went to establish the heretical cult-worship of a false god.

This would be punishable by death if proven true and it would also bring about the highest disgrace upon the name they were trying to exalt. Everything about the matter would be exposed and then soon forgotten by the world, leaving nothing but a legacy of miscreants bringing dishonor upon the true God they claimed to serve.

All of this is tied up in the notion of what Paul is showing "if in fact the dead do not rise." Everything about the Christian faith, and every person who has given life or limb for it, has its basis in the resurrection of Christ. Without that event, it would be nothing but a hopeless system based on an intricately detailed web of lies.

Life application: If you do not believe in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, your hope of eternal life is in vain and you should well-question your salvation. Calling on a dead Lord is about as stupid as driving a large nail into your forehead.

For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 1 Corinthians 15:16

Verse 13 and verse 16 are parallel lines of thought -

"But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen." (verse 13)

"For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen." (verse 16)

Why has Paul repeated himself after such a short time? First, the answer is that if the claim is false (verse 13), then the witness of the resurrection was also untrue (verses 14-15). Now, repeating himself, he shows that if the claim is false (verse 16), then the logical effects of the resurrection in the life of believers would also be false (verses 17-18). In turn, the consequences of such a false premise would then be realized in the lives of such hopeless creatures (verse 19). It is a second

reductio absurdum used to show the utter folly of a person claiming they are a Christian while denying that the resurrection of the body is true.

Viewed from either angle, without a literal resurrection of Christ, there is only futility and folly in claiming to be a Christian. Everything about the faith either stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Life application: If you have a problem with one of the principle doctrines of the faith, take time to think them through to their logical conclusion. Inevitably, if you fail to accept the truth of these principle doctrines, you should probably question your faith and thus your salvation. Stand firm on the truth of Christ as presented in the Bible.

And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins!

1 Corinthians 15:17

Paul, just prior to this verse, noted that "if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen." The logical result of this would be the most terrifying of all news. The premise of the resurrection comes from the truth that "the wages of sin is death." The Bible notes that "all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God." It is an all-inclusive statement because sin is not only some offense which has been actively committed, but it is also something that has been inherited by all people.

Because Adam who sinned at the beginning is our federal head, and all people are born from Adam's line, then all people are born in a state of sin. As an infinitely holy God cannot have fellowship with fallen, sinful creatures, then all must be condemned. Christ came to undo this terrible state. The resurrection of Christ would imply that He was, in fact, sinless. If He was sinless, then His death could be a suitable offering for our sins. But "if Christ is not risen," then our "faith *is* futile" because it would indicate that He died in sin.

Logically, if "the wages of sin is death," and Christ remained dead, then He died in sin. The word "futile" is the Greek work *mataia*. It is a different word than that translated as "empty" in verse 14. It signifies something fruitless. It indicates a difference between "reality and result' (Vincent's Word Studies).

Therefore, His death could not be a sin-offering, our sins could not be forgiven, and thus Paul notes that "you are still in your sins!" There is nothing magical or mystical about the work of Christ. Rather, it is exactly what is needed to free fallen man from the guilt he bears. Christ came to do that. In the cross, the Christian finds release from his sin-debt only if Christ rose again. The resurrection proves the offering was accepted by God, it proves Christ's sinless perfection, and it proves that those who call on Him are truly forgiven - once and for all.

Life application: The resurrection proves that the work of Christ at the cross was effective. If there is no literal, bodily resurrection of Christ, then there is no "Christian faith." It would be the greatest of lies. Further, there would still be no hope of reconciliation with God. All humanity would still be in their sins and destined for hell. Therefore, if someone tries to teach you that Christ didn't rise, or if they tell you that Christ didn't rise bodily, then tell them, "Take a hike, heretic. I stand on the truth of the Bible. Christ is risen! I believe!"

Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

1 Corinthians 15:18

Paul has been noting the consequences which would exist if Christ is not risen. The list has been sobering -

- 1) Preaching the gospel is empty
- 2) The faith of the believer is also empty
- 3) The apostles are actually found to be false witnesses of God
- 4) The believer's faith is futile
- 5) All remain in bondage to their sins

Now he notes another saddening consequence. If Christ hasn't risen, "then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." If someone called on a dead "Lord," then they are "in" that dead Lord. Because He is dead, when they die (Paul continues with the theme of "falling asleep" because his words are rhetorical), then they will "have perished."

A dead "Lord" who is not raised can certainly not raise another! Therefore, it is the end of the line for those who followed him as Lord. The dreams of a future restoration were lost. The efforts they put forth for their trusted Lord were wasted. The things they taught their own family and friends were lies. And the stake they were burned at, or the bullet which ended their life as they called out "I am Yours, O Christ" was of no merit. If Christ is not risen, then all of the hopes, dreams, aspirations, tears of joy, tears of sorrow, heartfelt prayers, and longing desires for His return... it was all misguided waste.

Paul will show the final consequence of such a notion in the coming verse.

Life application: There are a jillion religions on earth and the adherents of those various religions all believe that they are pursuing the true avenue to spiritual healing. And yet, only one can be true if God is truly God. There is but one way to be restored to our Creator and it is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The resurrection proves this is so, and the resurrection is not a mere vain hope. Instead, it is the truth of God. Be confident that your faith in Christ will be rewarded with eternal life in His wondrous presence.