

# THE MOST IMPORTANT 'BUT' IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

## (Sermon Summary)

### Reading: 1 Corinthians 15: 12-28.

The apostle Paul is writing to a church in all kinds of difficulties. There were many good people in the church but there were some wrong beliefs and some bad behaviour in circulation. One of the key doctrinal mistakes that was taking place was a denial of the bodily resurrection of the Lord (v12). Paul takes them through the implications of what the denial of the resurrection will lead to. He shows them that to lose the resurrection is to lose the hope of the gospel. So, having gone through the negative implications, were the resurrection not to be in fact true, he then asserts that the resurrection is true (v20). That verse begins in our English translation with the word 'but'. There can surely be no more important 'but' that has ever occurred in the English language than this one.

#### 1. A hard thing to believe.

Some of the people in the church in Corinth did not want, as they saw it, to be 'saddled' with the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of our Lord. Such a belief is a commitment to supernaturalism since a dead body has no independent power of self-regeneration. In our day, it is therefore something that materialists, people who deny there is any supernatural power in the universe, hate. They deny supernaturalism and therefore must, logically, deny the reality of the resurrection.

In the church in Corinth at that time there were those whom we might call 'anti-materialists'. They did not believe that there was anything good or permanent about the body and, therefore, they could not bring themselves to believe that the Lord would have a purpose for the body in the future. They could not countenance that God would affirm a long-term future for the body by literally bringing back our Lord Jesus Christ, in the body, from the dead. Nobody as great as the Lord Jesus would, in their estimate, have to suffer the indignity of being in a body. So they denied the bodily resurrection on those grounds.

But those in Corinth had an immediate problem in the shape of the person who was writing this letter to them. Paul was an actual eyewitness of the fact that the Lord was alive and that he, Paul, had seen Him. Indeed, lots of other people had seen Him too. While, to use the phrase that we hear at the moment, 'recollections may vary', there was no disputing this event and its reality. The fact of the resurrection was corroborated by multiple eyewitnesses who all affirmed the same thing.

Today, it is easier for people to dismiss the resurrection since Paul, and the other witnesses, are no longer alive and able, in person, to remonstrate with us that they had actually seen Him. Instead, we have what the Lord always intended we should have, the Bible to report these things to us. We are meant to take very seriously the Lord's account to us of this event. We are meant to believe it just as though those eyewitnesses, like Paul, were still alive and with us.

In verses 14-16, Paul takes the doubting Corinthians through the implications of denying the resurrection. For a start, they are implying that Paul is a liar and a false witness (v15). Besides that, he is a preacher of false hope so that his message is really empty and has nothing real to impart (v14). If all he is doing, as a preacher, is giving a false hope to people in this life, then this is pitiable and contemptible. All he is doing, as Peter describes it elsewhere (2 Peter 1:16) is telling people fables. It is just a weak and pathetic version of 'my truth'. If it is not 'the truth', then it is totally irrelevant and can be safely ignored. Since we sin in the body, it is in a real body that the Lord had to die. The bodily resurrection shows us that our sins in the body can be forgiven and now have the power to do differently. The body is fundamental, not something that it is unimportant.

## **2. But it is true!**

So, the 'but' of verse 20 is huge in importance and significance. Paul asserts that we do not have to 'think the unthinkable' and toy with the idea that Paul is a liar or that this is just a piece of make-believe to try to cheer us up. The 'but' is based on verses 4-8 and the list of people who were eyewitnesses to the event of our Lord coming back from the grave. There is no need to put Paul (or anyone else's reputation on the line), nor to doubt the message, or the hope which the message contains. All is well. The hope is based on solid ground. People actually witnessed the event and know what they saw.

This therefore means the death of all doubts, conjectures, uncertainties, and questions. Everything that the gospel tells us is true and is now put beyond a shadow of doubt. What it offers to us, by way of salvation from sin, is true and we can be certain and secure.

## **3. Learning to live with life.**

The resurrection is not an event to be thought of once a year, or something that is so far back in the past that it hardly has any relevance to us today. This 'but' of verse 20 is huge in its significance for us today and for all generations. It changes everything. It changes how we see the Lord Jesus Christ; how we see ourselves; how we see the world; and how we see the future.

We see that the Lord's claims to be the Son of God are beyond doubt. All His claims about everything are made good by His resurrection from the dead. All the promises that He has made to us are made reliable and sure by the resurrection. We can believe what it says in verse 25 about Him being in glory and ruling. He has destroyed death and is the first-fruits of all His people who will one day rise from the dead. His resurrection shows us clearly the shape of things to come.

We can see ourselves as beings that possess immortality. Today we have the immortality of the soul. One day we will come into the full possession of the immortality of the body too.

But where will we be in that future body? There are only two options that the Bible leaves open to us.

Some will, on the one hand, spend eternity in their new body in hell. This will be a profoundly unhappy experience. Hell will be full of people who clung to their opinions, who denied the resurrection and ridiculed and hated the truth, and those who believed it.

On the other hand, others will enjoy their resurrection body in the glory and happiness of heaven. These were the people who followed the evidence, who believed the great 'but' of verse 20, who took Christ at His word and who realized that it is not wise to dispute with someone who has come back from the dead.

We see the world we live in differently because now we see it as a place that needs to hear this message and believe it. We see the future differently as our hopes are no longer centred in this world but in the next.

So we adjust to live in the reality of life, eternal life. We live with the thought that this is the quality and quantity of life that the Lord Jesus is holding out to us in the gospel. It means we live better now with hardship and disappointment. We realize that we do not have to achieve everything now or put everything right in this life. We can be calmer and afford to live for the gospel, knowing that we will have more than enough time to catch up with everything else in glory.

We actually enjoy 'now' more as we are not under pressure to maximize what we do with it in terms that the world might expect. We do not have to cling to every 'now' as we will have an eternity of 'now's' to look forward to. In a sense we already, as far as can be on earth, have the best life possible because we have the greatest gift we can receive, salvation, the greatest purpose and work we can be about, and the hope of something unimaginably good for the future. This is why, perhaps, the 'but' of verse 20 is the most important 'but' in the English language.