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The Resurrection of Jesus in Galatians

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The Resurrection of Jesus in Galatians

In reaffirming the importance of the resurrection as part of the essential message of the gospel, one thing initially bothered me. Paul's letter to the Galatians is clearly a central Pauline statement of his key theology, written at a very early point in his ministry. Yet the letter on its surface seems to contain only one direct reference to the resurrection of Jesus, in 1:1-

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who **raised him from the dead**...

While this is clearly a key part of the letter, it might be read as a mere formality, which does not impact the rest of Paul's discussion. However, on careful reading of the letter it seems to me that the opposite is clearly true- that the reality of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and the implications of that for the Christian life, are fundamental to what Paul is saying.

In short, Paul operates in Galatians on a paradigm that sees two realities. One is "the present evil age" (1:4), the "world", which is associated with "the flesh". This reality is one in which obedience to the law is the way in which one pleases God. It is the reality taught and assumed by his opponents in Galatia, who are urging believers to adopt the Jewish law to be fully a part of God's people- especially the circumcision laws, but presumably also food and festivals and other rituals (4:10).

On the other hand, there is another reality: the new creation. The kingdom of God is a place associated with grace and truth. One enters this kingdom, not by law-keeping, but because of the death of Jesus on the cross, and by putting faith in Jesus.

Paul's point is that Jesus' death was designed to liberate us from the present evil age, the age where we think we can please God by law-keeping, into the true kingdom of God. It would not, however, be sufficient to be simply set free from the old age- it is vital that we be moved into the *new* age, into a new life. That is what happened when the Lord Jesus died- he did not simply stay in the grave having accomplished a formal "cleansing", he rose again to a new life! So God's people are designed to move into this new life.

We can see very direct references to the new life into which the Lord Jesus entered in 2:20-

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but **Christ who lives** in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul is dead. But of it is not enough to say that he has died; he now lives a *new* life! Indeed, just as he died with Christ, it is better to say that it is Christ who lives in him! It would of course be impossible for Paul to say this were Christ resting in his grave.

We can see this at the end of the letter, too. In one verse, 6:14, Paul seems to so stress the cross that, reading it in isolation, one may doubt whether the resurrection was at all important-

¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

And yet when we read the next verse we see-

¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a **new creation**.

Paul himself, and other believers, are indeed a “new creation”! But this would be impossible had not the Lord Jesus, after the cross, been raised again to be the Lord of the new creation! Paul, having been crucified to the world, is not simply lying dormant- he is living in the new age characterised by the new life of the Lord Jesus.

The other strand we see running through Galatians which reminds us of the need, not simply to escape from the old age, but to walk in the new age, are the many references to the Spirit. It is clear that the Spirit, in the Old Testament, is the marker of the new age of resurrection (Ez 36-37). So too here in 3:2-6 -

[2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—[6] just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

The new age, which is opposed to “works of the Law”, is characterised by the work of the Spirit, and by faith. Christ has redeemed us from the works of the Law by becoming himself a curse under that Law (3:13)- so that the blessings of the new age come, “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (3:14.) It is the resurrected Christ who sends the Spirit to do this renewal- though Paul does not directly say so here, he spells this out in other, later, letters (Eph 4:7ff). But what he says in Galatians everywhere presupposes this truth.

It is true that Paul does not say directly in Galatians all that could be said about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. To my mind the simplest explanation for this is the most obvious: to a church who had heard him preach as he is reported to have preached again and again in the book of Acts, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus was so well known as a central theme of the gospel that it did not need to be repeated explicitly, apart from the brief reminder in 1:1. In later letters, though, he would expound on the theme in more detail, perhaps because he was writing to people who had not heard him so directly. But the centrality of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus following his crucifixion, as opening the way to the new age and the “new creation”, as allowing him to impart the new life and the Spirit to those who live by faith, underpins all that Paul says here in this crucial letter.

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