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Conducted by  
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**“Could you please tell me what Paul meant when he says, ‘I have fought with the beasts at Ephesus’ (1 Cor, 15:32). Is he talking about animals or human beings?”**

The answer to a question like this would be no more than a partial answer if its only purpose was to say something of historical interest about the great Apostle. The importance of the question to the Christian is far greater than that, indeed, one might say that a correct understanding is **crucial** to the life of a Christian.

As I have pointed out in answers to previous questions, we need to follow the basic rules of interpretation and perhaps one of the most important of those rules is that we must look at this statement by Paul in the context of the rest of this chapter.

#### The Context

First of all let us see what that particular verse says, “if after the manner of men I have fought with the beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.”

Before we can understand this verse properly we need to know something of the background to the situation in Ephesus. The city was the gateway to Asia Minor and it became a most important port for trade flowing from Persia in the East, and from the increasingly prosperous lands in the Western Mediterranean. In 1000 BC Greeks settled there from the mainland of Greece and built a splendid city. They worshipped a goddess called Artemis who became known as Diana of the Ephesians during the later Roman occupation. It is evident that Paul first visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey but did not stay long in the city on that occasion, making it his intention to visit again during his third missionary journey (read Acts 18). In Acts chapter 19 we are told that he came again to the city and there found certain disciples who had only received John’s baptism; he acknowledged John’s baptism but told them that John had said that they should believe in him which should come after him, that is, in Christ Jesus. When they heard this they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus.

As Paul continued to preach and teach concerning the Kingdom of God he came into conflict with one Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines for Diana (Acts 19:23ff. These shrines were evidently for people to buy and keep in their homes, and this is an indication as to how powerful a hold the worship of this fertility goddess had on the people of Ephesus). Demetrius and his fellow-silversmiths, seeing the prospect of their profit disappearing because of the preaching of Paul, turned on him and would no doubt have harmed him if some of the Asiarchs had not intervened on his behalf and calmed the people. (Read Acts ch. 19).

A Mr. Wood, excavating on the site of Ephesus in the year 1870, uncovered what was the grandeur of the Temple of Diana and also the great theatre there. The theatre, capable of holding an estimated 24,000 people, would no doubt be used for the ‘sport’ of men fighting animals, and indeed, of men fighting men; this was the Roman custom.

This, then, was the situation in which Paul found himself at Ephesus. The reader will no doubt recall that Paul left Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem so that he could be there for Pentecost. On the way they stopped at Miletus and it was from there that he sent for the elders of the Church at Ephesus and delivered to them some

of the most beautiful and moving words that one can read, and also gave them a solemn warning to watch over the Church.

#### The Context

The whole of I Cor. 15 has to do with the argument of Paul concerning what I term 'resurrection faith'. He starts the chapter with a statement about the facts of the Gospel, and then goes on to show how the arguments of those who say that there is no resurrection of the dead are really absurd. He even shows the absurdity of the custom of being baptised for the dead if at the end of the day there is no resurrection. It is at the end of the chapter that he uses those magnificent and earth-transcending words which, rather unfortunately, we always seem to reserve for funerals but which are really the essence of the Gospel.

It is in this context that we must now analyse our verse. In the few words of verse 30 there is indicated to us the great and constant dangers faced by the early saints when they preached the Gospel. Paul himself, from the time when he was apprehended by Christ on the Damascus road until his last visit to Rome, was never out of danger. In his second letter to Corinth he recalls the perils in Asia and gives words of consolation, "**And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation .... we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead; Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver**" (2 Cor. 1:7-10). Paul was never too far away from his God. He realised the glory of the Gospel, as he says in 2 Cor. 4:6-12, "**For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ**" (read on). He was dogged in his efforts to spread the Gospel because of Judaizing teachers who followed him everywhere, but he was willing to resist them to the point of death because he knew that if Judaism took over, then the Gospel was dead.

In verse 32 the phrase 'fought with beasts' is rendered by the Greek word **THERIOMACHOS** and means literally 'a fighter with wild beasts'. We have already said that in Ephesus men would fight with animals in the arena for the 'sport' of the people so we can see quite clearly why Paul should use such a phrase. Furthermore we notice that he does not say, 'I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus' but '**if after the manner of men I fought with beasts at Ephesus**'. I think we can readily understand that in conflict with wild beasts some men would die in the arena, so what Paul seems to be saying is "**if I, like some men do, fought with the beasts at Ephesus and were killed, what would it profit me if there were no resurrection of the dead; I might as well say, 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'**" In saying this, Paul is not giving his own view, but that of people who deny the resurrection, like the Epicureans, for instance. No, he is further stating his argument for the resurrection because in the very next verse he says, "Be not deceived", in other words 'do not be led astray by such a false philosophy of life'.

It seems to me that the evidence points to the fact that he is using **figurative** language in verse 32; this view is strengthened because he does not mention such a peril when he wrote his second letter to Corinth wherein he catalogues all the perils and dangers endured by himself and others (see 2 Cor. 4:8-12; also 11: 22-28). Furthermore, Paul was a Roman citizen and it would have been unlawful to put him into the arena at Ephesus, or anywhere else which was under Roman jurisdiction for that matter.

We can trace in the writings of this great Apostle his abiding passion for the knowledge of Christ. We see him almost at the end of his days in house custody in Rome but he is still writing and speaking about the glorious Gospel he has embraced.

**We see the grandeur of the upward call of God in his letter to Philippi, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Phil.3:10,11). At the end of that particular chapter the Spirit drives him ever upward in thought, “For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (vv 20,21). The truly amazing thought is that Paul is our Brother in Christ.**

**(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden,**