

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
1 Corinthians

VIII. 1 Corinthians 15:1-58
The Meaning of Resurrection

It is fairly clear that Paul thinks the Corinthians are making a big mistake when it comes to their faith in Jesus' resurrection. It would be a big help if we knew what that mistake was.

Here are some possibilities that have been suggested.

1) At least some of the Corinthians believe that there is no life after death—of any form. They may actually believe the slogan, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (15:32)

2) At least some of the Corinthians believe that there is life after death, but that life is not the resurrection of the body but some kind of continuing existence for the soul.

3) At least some of the Corinthians believe that Resurrection is not a future event, but that for believers' resurrection has already happened. Scholars who think that this is the Corinthian “heresy” often claim that 1 Corinthians 15 is the clue to many of the Corinthians problems. When some say “already we are rich” they are saying, “Resurrection now!” When they speak in the tongues of angels they think they are participating in resurrection conversation. When a man sleeps with his stepmother it is because he's already resurrected and does not need to worry about the rules and stigmas of the present age. And when Paul says that in the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's *death until he comes*, that is a reminder that Christian worship is not yet the heavenly banquet but a time of remembrance and hope.

In a strategy a little like the TV program “Jeopardy” we suggest that we start with Paul's answers and then make our best guesses about the Corinthians' questions.

Paul's first answer is that the belief in Jesus' resurrection is a given of the Christian faith. That is non-negotiable. It seems likely that he assumes the Corinthians believe in that resurrection, too.

Paul's second answer is that you cannot make sense of Jesus' resurrection unless you believe that Jesus' rising is only the first act in the general drama of the resurrection of the dead. All by itself Jesus' resurrection makes no sense. It takes its meaning from the larger context. Because Jesus did rise, so will the faithful.

Paul's third answer is that what will rise at the last day is not the "soul" but the body. On the other hand the body that rises will not be just like the earthly body. Paul knows that bodies decay and turn to dust. What will rise is a spiritual body, by which he apparently means those who rise on the last day will be distinctively themselves but not simply their same old selves.

Paul's fourth answer is that the general resurrection is decidedly a future event and not a present reality.

Paul's fifth answer is that the purpose of resurrection—like the purpose of creation, redemption and the life of the Corinthian church and every church—is the triumph of God. The great promise toward which the whole cosmos moves is not (just) that Paul and the Corinthians will rise again; it is not even, surprisingly, that Jesus will be proclaimed as Lord. The great promise toward which the whole cosmos moves is that God will be "all in all." 15:28

Questions for Further Study:

1. How do you think Paul's reminder of the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection relates to what he says about the resurrection of believers? Looking at it from the other direction, does what Paul says about the resurrection of believers give us any clues to his understanding of Jesus' resurrection?

2. Notice the way in which Paul uses analogies from nature (vss. 36-42) to try to explain his view of the resurrected body. Do you find such arguments helpful here? Where are other places where we might look at the relationship between the natural world and the world of faith?

3. Paul never writes down a systematic discussion of the relationship of Jesus to God in his letters. If you had only this chapter, how might you describe Jesus' role in God's plan. Look at the material on Adam in vv.45 ff and about the consummation of history in vv. 24-28.

Questions for Discussion:

1. David Bartlett once preached an Easter sermon on this text where he tried to sound very much like Paul, saying that what the Corinthians seemed to think was that Jesus had risen from the dead but that none of the later Christians would do so. A very wise member of the congregation came up afterwards and said: "That's exactly what I believe." How would Paul respond to this? How would you?

2. In Christian funerals and memorial services we often hear that the person who has died has “gone to be with God.” Or is “in heaven with the saints.” There are some New Testament passages that might suggest such a hope, but there is no such claim in 1 Corinthians 15. Does it make any difference whether Paul’s view of death and resurrection is right or whether the more common view reflected in our funerals is right?

3. Look at the way Paul ends the chapter: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” How do these exhortations follow from all that he’s been saying about resurrection? Or is this just like the parental PS “Don’t forget to finish your final paper before you come home for Christmas”?

For further study:

Jeffrey Asher, “SPEIRETAI: Paul’s Anthropogenic Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44,” *JBL* 120 (2001) 101-22 or
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=22&hid=105&sid=9cb1b54a-ce84-4fbc-a41e-e2a3d31d2806%40sessionmgr109>

Richard A. Horsley, “*Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos*: Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians,” *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976) 269-88.

Idem, “How Can Some of You Say, ‘There is no Resurrection of the Dead’? Spiritual Elitism in Corinth,” *NovT* 20 (1978) 203-31

William O. Walker, “1 Corinthians 15:29-24 as a non-Pauline Interpolation,” *CBQ* 69 (2007) 84-103 or
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=3&sid=55f3fb40-624f-40fb-8e8b-32bc32597dee%40sessionmgr2>