



## First Corinthians

### 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

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

[www.yalebiblestudy.org](http://www.yalebiblestudy.org)