

IF THERE IS NO RESURRECTION 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-58

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with Ra McLaughlin

The challenge of our belief in Christ's resurrection is not something that began with the rise of modern science and naturalistic thinking. It has been a foolish notion to many people from the day Jesus rose from the grave until now. In this chapter, Paul called on the Corinthians to lay hold of their faith in Christ's resurrection, and to see the importance of living in the light of the hope it brings.

Paul addressed a doctrinal controversy over resurrection. He did not indicate the source of this problem, and the issue in the church may have been very complex. Some may indeed have denied the resurrection of Christ; but some certainly said of believers, "**There is no resurrection of the dead**" (15:12).

Both Greek and Jewish thought may have influenced the Corinthians to question resurrection. Most Greek religions of Paul's day conceived of the afterlife as a spiritual, non-corporeal existence. Except for the Sadducees, the Jews by and large believed in the resurrection of the body. Yet, unbelieving Jews still denied Christ's resurrection. Christians, however, believed that the Messiah's resurrection established the certainty of the bodily resurrection of all believers in Christ.

THE REALITY OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION (15:1-11)

15:1. Paul appealed once again to the Corinthians as **brothers** (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:31,50,58; 16:15), affirming them in their basic commitments to Christ's resurrection. He wanted to **remind** them of the **gospel**, not to challenge their acceptance of it.

The **gospel**, or good news, is the message of God's saving work in Christ. Until this point, Paul had oriented the gospel message more closely around the Christ's death (1:13,17-18,23; 2:2,8; 8:11; 11:26), but here he **preached** the gospel by emphasizing the resurrection. He also affirmed his belief that the Corinthian Christians had **received** this gospel message and had **taken** their **stand** on it. In Paul's day being a Christian was not easily reduced to mere intellectual assent. The social price Christians paid forced them to take a stand in a hostile world.

15:2. Anyone who did not hold to the **gospel** Paul had previously preached, embracing both Christ's death and resurrection, could not be **saved** from God's

judgment. But they were **saved** if they held **firmly to the word**. As he indicated throughout this epistle (1:8; 3:17; 4:5; 9:27; 10:11-13; compare Rom. 2:6-7; 5:3-5; 15:4-5; Gal. 6:7-9; Phil. 2:2-16; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1,16; 2 Tim. 2:12; 4:10), Paul believed that over time saving faith would prove itself from insincerity (compare Matt. 3:8-10; 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; Luke 8:15; John 15:10,16; Jas. 1:12; 2:14-18; Heb. 6:4-11; 10:23-31,36-39; 2 Pet. 1:10; 2:20; 1 John 2:19; 5:2-5; Rev. 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). True believers persevere in their commitments to Christ.

Paul freely warned that if the Corinthians did not hold fast to the gospel they had heard, then they **believed in vain**. Anyone who turns away from belief in the resurrection of Christ stands in line for God's judgment, not for eternal salvation. This foreshadowed Paul's defense of the resurrection in 15:12-19.

15:3-4. Next, Paul explained the importance of the resurrection (15:3-11). He justified (**for**) his insistence that Christians hold fast to the gospel, and insisted that the resurrection was central to the gospel message (see 15:1-2). Why was the resurrection a necessary element of the gospel?

First, Paul **received** and **passed on** this gospel. In rabbinic Judaism this terminology described the transmission of authoritative religious teachings (compare 11:23). Paul told the Corinthians to maintain the gospel as he had given it to them because it was a sacred tradition, not merely a human one.

Second, both the death and the resurrection of Christ were **of first importance**. Both took place "**according to the Scriptures**," a phrase which Paul repeated to emphasize the importance of the scriptural witness and to demonstrate that Christ's resurrection was as important as his death.

Paul spoke first of Christ's death, stating, "**Christ died for our sins**." Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of believers brought salvation to those who would otherwise have been lost. Paul probably had in mind Isaiah's predictions that the son of David would suffer on behalf of God's people (Isa. 52:13-15; 53:1-12; Matt. 8:17; Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32-33; 1 Pet. 2:22-25).

Second, he referred to the Resurrection. Christ was **buried**, but **he was raised on the third day**. Paul never said that Christ raised himself, but that the Father raised Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 4:24; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15; 2 Cor. 4:14; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10). The Resurrection was also **according to the Scriptures**. Paul probably had in mind Isaiah 53:10-12, which explained that the son of David would return from death to bring great blessings to God's people. He also may have thought of Psalm 16:10 where David recorded that God's Holy One would not see decay (compare Acts 2:27,31; 13:34-45). Jesus himself defended resurrection in the Old Testament by asserting that God was the God of the living (Matt. 22:31-32). By including Christ's death and resurrection as essential elements of the gospel, Paul excluded from salvation those who denied the

Resurrection (see 15:9).

15:5-8. Christ was not simply raised from the dead. He also **appeared**; people saw and heard him (Matt. 28:9-10,17-20; Luke 24:13-51; John 20:14-23,26-29; 21:1-23; Acts 1:3-9; 9:3-6). Paul did not repeat the refrain “**according to the Scriptures**” here because no particular prophecy focused on appearances of the resurrected Son of David. He did note, however, that many testified to Christ’s resurrection: **Peter, ... the Twelve, ... more than five hundred of the brothers ... most of whom were still living, ... James, ... all the apostles**, and Paul himself.

In a mood of self-effacement, Paul said that Christ had appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9) **last of all ... as to one abnormally born**. The expression “**last of all**” likely indicates that Paul was the last one ever to see the resurrected Christ. Viewing the resurrected Savior was a requirement for apostleship (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1). Yet, Paul admitted that his own situation had been extraordinary because Christ had come to him miraculously after the Ascension. “**Abnormally born**” (“untimely born” NASB, NRSV; “born out of due time” NKJV) is difficult to translate because it occurs only here in the New Testament. By this term, Paul humbly indicated his inferiority as an apostle to those who had lived with Jesus on earth.

15:9. Explaining (**for**) why he spoke of himself in this way, Paul admitted to being the **least of the apostles**, not even deserving the title because he **persecuted the church of God** (Acts 7:58; 8:1,3; 9:1-5,13-14). Probably, this resonated strongly with his detractors. They most likely thought, “Obviously he is the least, that is why we favor Apollos and Cephas” (1:12; 3:4,21-22; 4:6).

Having granted their premises, however, Paul asserted his own conclusion. Paul had apostolic authority because God had chosen him. Paul had no doubts that had been called as a Christian and as Christ’s apostle (“**I am what I am**”) only by the **grace of God** (compare Gal. 1:15-16). Elsewhere he taught that Christian life not only begins by grace (1 Cor. 1:22-21; 3:6-7; Rom. 8:29-30; 9:16; Eph. 2:1-9; Phil. 1:29; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; 2:25; Tit. 3:3-7), but also that it continues through God’s grace received by faith (Rom. 1:17; 5:1-10; 8:26-39; 12:3; 14:4; 15:5; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Gal. 2:20; 3:11; Eph. 1:13-14; Phil 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24). Here he evaluated his own life in these terms. Not only had he initially believed because of God’s grace, but every good thing in his Christian life also came from the grace of God.

Paul concerned himself with one particular aspect of God’s **grace** in his life. Divine mercy had great **effect**, or result, on his service to the body of Christ. This is the same type of argument he used in 9:1-27 to defend his apostleship. The one who had once persecuted the church **worked harder than all of** the other apostles. Paul simply assessed the situation honestly, not speaking proudly as if he had accomplished anything on his own, and quickly reiterating that he did nothing in his own power (compare 3:5-6; 4:7). He performed only by **the grace of God that was with** him. Paul knew himself too well to take credit for the good he had done. Only **the grace of God**

was sufficient to produce these good works through him.

15:11. Paul closed this section by returning to the main idea: The Corinthians had to embrace wholeheartedly the resurrection of Christ. All the apostles agreed that Christ's resurrection was central to the gospel, and all continued to **preach** this message, which the Corinthians at one time had universally **believed**.

In the next section, Paul revealed his chief concern, wondering, "**How can some ... say that there is no resurrection of the dead?**" (15:12). The Corinthians apparently did not have significant problems believing that Christ had been resurrected (compare 15:11). The passage deals more directly with doubts about the general resurrection of all believers. Paul explained that Christ's resurrection necessitated believers' resurrection.

IF THERE IS NO RESURRECTION, THEN CHRIST IS DEAD (15:12-19)

Paul first addressed opponents who evidently opposed the idea of human corpses being resurrected into glorified bodies. To refute them, Paul assumed for the sake of argument that their assertion "**there is no resurrection of the dead**" (15:12) was true, and then demonstrated that it led to absurd conclusions.

15:12-13. Paul posed a dilemma: **if he had preached** and the Corinthians had believed **that Christ had been raised from the dead**, they could not absolutely deny the **resurrection of the dead**. It was contradictory to affirm Christ's resurrection on the one hand, and to deny all other resurrections on the other.

The phrase "**resurrection of the dead**" (*anastasis nekron*) appears in the book of Acts without reference to a general resurrection (Acts. 17:31-32; 26:23). Paul duplicated this use in Romans 1:4. Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 15:21 he used it as counterpart to physical "death." Therefore, Paul did not always use this terminology as a technical term for the general resurrection of believers on the last day.

Like the Sadducees (Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8), Greek philosophers resisted the gospel because they rejected the idea of human bodily resurrection (Acts 17:32). Perhaps the argument that **there is no resurrection of the dead** was advanced by Corinthians who had become enamored with worldly wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1-4)? Some commentators argue that these Corinthians spiritualized the resurrection of believers. Errors of spiritualization are understandable when one considers Jesus' statement, "**I am the resurrection**" (John 11:25). Such language might be misconstrued to mean that bodily resurrection was a metaphor for true spiritual life — that Jesus is raised from the dead in the heart as we embrace the gospel. The vocabulary of a resurrection "in Jesus" (Acts 4:2) might also have been misinterpreted to teach this. In this error, the Corinthians may not have denied the possibility of restoration of life to dead bodies such as took place with Lazarus (John

11:43-44), but rather resurrection to an eternal state in which one would never die (Luke 20:36; Rom. 6:8-9; 1 Cor. 15:52-55).

According to Paul, because believers' eternal resurrections and Jesus' are of the same type, one cannot be possible and the other impossible. Therefore, if people cannot be bodily resurrected, then Jesus was not resurrected. Further, the fact of Christ's resurrection invalidates any philosophical objection to the possibility of believers' resurrection.

15:14-15. Because denying general resurrection also denies Christ's resurrection, the Corinthians' position created seven points of tension: 1) the apostles' **preaching** was **useless**; 2) the Corinthians' own **faith** was in vain; and 3) the apostles were **false witnesses**.

Bodily resurrection was essential to the gospel (15:3-4), and without Christ's resurrection the gospel would be false. Therefore, **preaching** it and believing it would both be **useless**. Because the gospel would be a lie, to preach the gospel would be to testify falsely **about God**.

15:16. Paul paused to reassert that if the **dead** cannot be **raised**, then **Christ has not been raised**. This point was so important that Paul felt compelled to repeat it. This break in the list of ridiculous conclusions divides the list in 15:14-15 from that in 15:17-19.

15:17-19. Paul added that denying bodily resurrection necessitated that: 4) the Corinthians' **faith** was **futile**; 5) the Corinthians were **still in** their **sins**; 6) those who had **fallen asleep** [died] **in Christ** were **lost** forever; and 7) believers should **be pitied more than all men**.

That the Corinthians' **faith** would be **futile** duplicates the point that it would be **useless** (15:14), but with a different implication — their futile faith would leave them **in** their **sins**, under the curse of God's wrath. This argument probably struck home with many Corinthians, whose radically changed lifestyles had come through the gospel (6:9-11). Their new lifestyles proved that Christ must have been raised.

Likewise, if faith were in vain, then no Christian who had died would ever receive an eternal benefit for having repented and believed. None would ever realize any part of the salvation for which he had hoped; everything would have been a lie. These implications of denying bodily resurrection addressed the emotional aspect of Christian living. If the Corinthians insisted that bodily resurrection could not occur, they would completely undermine their own reasons for hope.

Further, Christians would be the most pitiful and pitiable people on earth. Modern Christians sometimes see Christian living as so beneficial that they think it would be better to live as a Christian than not, even if Christianity were a false. This is true

because, for many Christians, commitment to Christ does not require much suffering. In the early church, however, as in modern countries that persecute Christians, believers sacrificed much to follow Christ. They lost families, friends, jobs, homes, and at times even their lives. If their hope for resurrection proved to be false, not only would they receive no benefit from their religion, but they would also forfeit the pleasures their brief lives on earth offered.

CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED, THEREFORE BELIEVERS WILL LIVE (15:20-28)

By pointing out that Christ's resurrection was the firstfruits of the much greater harvest of the general resurrection, Paul pressed the Corinthians to reject any disbelief in the resurrection of all believers. The firstfruits having already been delivered, it was impossible that the harvest should not be realized in full. Further, just as all died because of their union with Adam, all who are in Christ must participate in Christ's resurrection by being resurrected themselves.

15:20. Paul insisted that **Christ indeed had been raised from the dead**, but Christ's resurrection was more than one individual's triumph over death. At the very heart of Christ's resurrection was the idea that he was **the firstfruits of those who had fallen asleep**. The New Testament frequently uses the euphemism "sleep" for the death of believers to stress that their deaths are only temporary conditions (Matt. 27:52; John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6,18,51; 1 Thess. 4:13-15; 5:10; 2 Pet. 3:4). Paul's analogy compared Christ's resurrection and the Old Testament ritual of firstfruits. In the Mosaic calendar the firstfruits were the very first portions of harvest, and were offerings to God (Lev. 23:15-17; Deut. 26:1-11). The firstfruits indicated that the whole harvest was soon to follow. Christ's resurrection was the beginning of something much larger: the full harvest of all believers who had died.

15:21. Paul explained (**for**) in what sense Christ was raised as the firstfruits of all who would one day be raised, arguing for a symmetry in God's dealings with the human race (see also Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:45-49). In the first place, Genesis makes it plain that **death came through a man**. Adam's sin was more than a personal transgression; it brought guilt and the divine judgment of death on all of humanity. **Since** it was through Adam that death came, it should not be surprising that **the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man**. In many passages Paul pointed out that God considered Christ's experience on earth much more than one person's experience. What happened to him in his death and resurrection happens to all who believe in him (Rom 6:3-11; 7:4; 2 Cor. 5:14-17; 13:4; Gal. 2:19-20; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:12-13; 2:20; 3:1,3-4,10-11; Phil. 3:10-11; 2 Tim. 2:11).

15:22. Restating his previous explanation (**for**), Paul continued to rely on the symmetry between Adam and Christ. **In Adam all die . . . in Christ all will be made alive**. Paul drew a very important parallel between Adam and Christ (**as in Adam . . . so in Christ**), but one must be careful not to misunderstand this comparison. From the

rest of Paul's writings (and from the entire Bible), one must conclude that the similarity between Adam and Christ is not numerical but functional. That is to say, Paul did not suggest that the number of people who receive salvation equals the number of people who suffer death — not everyone is saved (Rom. 2:5-12; 3:5-6; 8:13; 9:18-23,27-28; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 5:6; Phil. 3:18-19; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:15-16; 2 Thess. 1:6-10).

Paul's main concern in this passage was to show that Christ's personal resurrection necessitated the general resurrection of all believers. He did this by pointing to a theological belief shared with the Corinthians: Adam's personal life had affected everyone joined to him. In the same way, Paul argued, Christ's personal life affected everyone joined to him, everyone **in Christ**.

"In Christ" describes the union between believers and Christ (see Rom. 3:24; 6:11,23; 8:1,2,39; 12:5; 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:2,430; 15:18; 2 Cor. 3:14; 5:17,19; 12:2; Gal. 2:17; 3:14,26,28; Eph. 1:1,3,10-11,12,20; 2:6,7,10,13; 3:6; 4:32; Phil. 2:1; 4:7; Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 4:16; 5:18; 2 Tim. 1:9,13; 2:1,10; 3:12,15; compare also the many occurrences of "in him"). Because believers are united to Christ, God accounts Christ's merit to them. For this reason, they receive many benefits and blessings that otherwise would belong to Christ alone. Among other things, these benefits include all the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:14), such as justification (Gal. 3:8). Perhaps the richest sampling of these benefits appears in Ephesians 1:3-14, where Paul claimed "every spiritual blessing" comes only "in Christ," such as: election to holiness and blamelessness; predestination to adoption as sons; grace; redemption; forgiveness of sins; God's favor; the consummation of creation; election and predestination to glory; salvation; reception of the Holy Spirit; and a guaranteed inheritance in heaven. To these should be added: righteousness (Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9); sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30); a regenerate spirit (Rom. 8:10); eternal life (Rom. 6:23); and the promise of a resurrected body (Rom. 8:10-11; Phil. 3:9-11).

In the verse at hand, **"in Christ"** indicates those united to Christ by faith (2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20; 3:14,26; Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim. 3:15). As Paul put it in 15:23, those who are in Christ and receive resurrection through him are **"those who belong to him."** Because of this union, Christ's resurrection must be followed by the resurrection of all who are **in Christ**.

15:23. Having theologically justified calling Christ the firstfruits, Paul continued the analogy (15:23-28). The term firstfruits suggests a certain order. Resurrection will happen **to each in his own turn**. First, **Christ** as the **firstfruits** has already been resurrected. Second, **those who belong to him**, who have exercised saving faith in Christ, will be raised along with Christ. This second resurrection will occur **when he comes** in the Second Advent (1 Cor. 4:5; 11:26; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15-17; 5:2-3,23; 2 Thess. 2:1,2,8).

15:24. After Christ returns **then the end will come**. It will be time for the final judgment and the formation of the new creation (Matt. 13:37-43,49-50; John 12:48; Acts

17:31; Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 1:8; 4:5; 2 Pet. 3:3-13; Rev. 20:11-21:8). At this time, Christ will give **over the kingdom to God the Father**. Just as the firstfruits of the Old Testament sacrificial system symbolically represented giving the entire harvest to God, so Christ's resurrection symbolically represented of a much greater harvest to be given to God the Father — the harvest of the entire kingdom. Just as an entire harvest far exceeds the firstfruits, so the harvest of the dominion given to the Father will be beyond measure. This handing over to the Father will occur only **after Christ has destroyed all dominion, authority and power**, including both human authority (Rom. 13:1-3; Col. 1:16; Tit. 3:1) and demonic powers (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:13,16; Col. 2:10,15).

15:25. To explain this scenario further (**for**), Paul pointed out that Christ **must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet**. Psalm 110 is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. This verse recollects Psalm 110:1 (see also Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43). Originally, this Psalm spoke of the promise of great victories given to the descendants of David. Every time a Davidic king experienced victory over an enemy, he saw this dynastic promise realized. Paul rightly applied this Psalm to Christ, for Christ is the great and final son to sit on David's throne (Mark 11:10; Luke 1:32-33). In Christ, all the promises to David's family are realized fully.

Paul specifically focused on reigning in victory. The New Testament explains that Christ was seated on the throne of David at the time of his resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20-21). God once promised that David's family would rule over the entire earth (Ps. 89:20-29), and this promise now applies to Christ. Thus, it is necessary that Christ eventually reign over everyone and everything.

15:26-27a. Of course, **the last enemy** which Christ will destroy is **death** itself. Adam introduced death into the human race (Rom. 5:12-14), but Christ has come to eliminate death from human existence (John 11:26; Rom. 6:8-9). Yet, this destruction of death will take place gradually. The total elimination of death is the last great work of Christ when he raises believers to everlasting life and utterly frees them from the power of death (Phil. 3:10-14; Heb. 2:14-15; Rev. 20:6).

How can one know that death will be destroyed? Paul referred once again to Psalm 110:1, emphasizing that Christ would dominate **everything**. The great son of David must reign over all things, including death itself. Since Christ will reign over death, those in Christ cannot be subject to death's dominion. Therefore, the general resurrection of all believers is absolutely certain.

15:27b-28. Realizing that he had pushed the term **everything** to the limits, Paul qualified himself to avoid confusion. He noted that it was **clear** or obvious to those reading Psalm 110 carefully that the term "**everything**" did **not include God himself**, because God the Father is the one **who put everything under Christ**. As a result, when all is accomplished **the Son himself will be made subject** to the Father **so that**

God may be all in all.

IF THERE IS NO RESURRECTION, LIFE IS MEANINGLESS (15:29-34)

It is meaningless to live as a Christian if there is no resurrection (compare 15:19). The Corinthians themselves had hope for the future, and that this hope was incompatible with a denial of the general resurrection.

15:29. First, Paul raised a point that his original readers clearly understood, but which has confounded interpreters for almost two millennia. He pointed to the absurdity of believing there would be **no resurrection** of believers in light of the practice of being **baptized for the dead**. **If the dead are not raised**, no reason exists to be **baptized for them**.

There are no other biblical references to anything like a baptism for the dead. Explanations for this verse are quite varied, and none is entirely convincing. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that Paul identified a practice of which he did not necessarily approve. He referred to the practitioners in the third person ("**people**"; "they" NASB, NKJV) rather than in the first ("we") or second person ("you"), probably purposely avoiding close association with them. If this view is correct, then Paul simply pointed out the inconsistency between this practice and the denial of the general resurrection. He asked what sense it would make for them to deny the final resurrection while practicing vicarious baptism for the dead.

15:30-32. Second, Paul appealed to the sacrifices that he and other apostles (**we**) made for the sake of Christian work. He asked for some explanation for the fact that they **endanger**[ed] themselves **every hour**. Those who first bore the gospel of Christ did so at great personal risk. They were imprisoned (Acts 4:3, 5:18; 8:3; 12:3-4; 16:23-24,37; 21:33; 22:19), beaten (Acts 5:40; 16:22-23,37; 18:17; 21:32; 22:19), stoned (Acts 7:58-59; 14:19), and murdered (Acts 7:60; 12:1-2; 22:20). Paul described his own perils more fully in 2 Corinthians 4:8-11 and 11:23-27. Here, he elaborated on his sacrifices by saying that it was as if he **die[d] every day**. To ward off the accusation of exaggeration, Paul added, "**I mean that brothers.**" Paul's entire ministry entailed daily endangerment and self-sacrifice. His personal loss was just as sure as the fact that he took **glory** or delight **over** the faithful Corinthian believers **in Christ Jesus the Lord**.

Paul next referred to an event of which the Corinthians evidently were aware: Paul had **fought wild beasts in Ephesus**. Acts 19:1-20:1 records Paul's difficulties during his three-year stay in Ephesus. Although some interpreters have suggested it, Paul probably did not have to fight animals as a civil punishment. As a Roman citizen he would have been protected from many punishments (Acts 16:37-38; 21:39; 22:25-29; 23:27-29; 25:11,16; 28:17-18). In addition, Titus formally inaugurated the Colosseum in A.D. 70, thus the facilities to carry out and popularize these punishments were not yet available. In all likelihood, Paul spoke figuratively, following the example of the Psalms

(Pss. 7:1-2; 10:9; 17:12; 22:12,13,16,20,21; 35:17; 57:4; 58:4-6; 68:30; 74:19; 140:3), describing his persecutors as vicious beasts (compare Paul's language in Acts 20:29; 2 Tim. 4:17).

Whatever event he had in mind, Paul never would have endured such a trial **for mere human reasons**, i.e. without the greater goal of resurrection in mind. **What** would he have **gained** from that? Nothing. If it were true that **"the dead are not raised,"** then Paul would not have lived such a hard life. Instead, he would have subscribed to the philosophy **"Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die."** These words allude to Isaiah 22:13 (see also Luke 12:19-20) where the prophet rebuked his listeners for not taking the warnings of divine judgment seriously. Here, Paul said that irresponsible sensual revelry would be the only reasonable approach to life if there were no hope of resurrection. Put simply, Paul appealed to the Corinthians to consider his own life as strong evidence that the future resurrection of believers was an essential Christian belief. Without the hope of resurrection, one cannot justify the sacrifices of living for Christ.

15:33-34. The apostle worried that those who denied the resurrection of the dead might corrupt sincere Corinthian believers. Therefore, he reminded them of a well-known proverb from the Greek poet Menander: "Bad company corrupts good morals." The Corinthian believers associated with people who scoffed at and mocked the notion of a future resurrection, and Paul wanted them to break off these associations. Probably these associates advocated Greek philosophy, not only denying the resurrection (Acts 17:31), but also influencing some Corinthians to pursue worldly wisdom (1:17-26; 3:18-21). Thus, Paul called the Corinthians to **come back to their senses**, to adopt his teaching in the preceding verses. Those who denied the future resurrection of believers were **sinning and ignorant of God**. They did not understand basic things of the gospel revealed in Christ.

Paul was concerned that associating with such unchristian thinkers would also corrupt the Corinthians' behavior. It seems evident throughout this epistle that the sectarian and factious thinking of the Corinthians, probably based in Greek thinking, became the basis for all sorts of sins, including but not limited to: divisions (1:10-12; 11:18); immorality (5:1-2; 6:15-17); lawsuits (6:1,8); mistreatment of one another at the Lord's Supper (11:18-22); and abuse of spiritual gifts (12:21-25; 12:31-13:3; 14:37-40). For this reason, Paul gave this instruction **to their shame**. They should have been ashamed of accepting these false teachers and their ways.

THE NATURE OF RESURRECTION (15:35-58)

Paul now turned to some specific issues regarding the nature of believers' resurrected bodies.

15:35. **"Someone may ask"** indicates that Paul had either heard about this

objection, or he anticipated that someone might raise it. Paul listed two specific issues: **how . . . the dead are raised**; and **what kind of body** the dead will have when **they come** back to life. Both of these questions presented the same objection in different terms, and constituted more than legitimate inquiry into the nature of resurrection. They were cloaked objections to the possibility of a general resurrection.

In all likelihood, these objections stemmed from Greek dualism, which taught that the soul is good but the body corrupt. In this view, death allowed the soul to liberate itself from the body. Some commentators suggest that the Corinthians rightly understood that Christians would be resurrected in the same bodies they possessed before death, but wrongly thought that God would not perfect these bodies. For them, the resurrection presented an awful scene of reanimated, unrestored corpses. Paul's opponents apparently thought they had pointed out the odious nature of Paul's position.

15:36. As a result, Paul responded quite harshly, "**How foolish!**" Literally, he called his hypothetical opponent a "fool" ("You fool!" NASB; "Fool!" NRSV; "Foolish one" NKJV) because these objections disregarded God's incomparable abilities.

To demonstrate how counterintuitive his opponents were, Paul appealed to a regular natural occurrence analogous to the future resurrection of believers. Responding to the first objection, "**How are the dead raised?**" (15:35), Paul answered that a seed that is sown **does not come to life unless it dies**. Every time a seed grows into a tree or a plant, it is first buried as if it were dead. The commonplace ability of a seed to overcome its burial was reason enough for everyone to believe that human beings may be resurrected and renewed by God.

15:37-38a. Second, Paul answered the objection, "**With what kind of body will they come?**" (15:35). Again, he used the example of a normal seed to respond. When people plant seeds, they **do not plant the body that will be**. In other words, a seed does not look anything like the plant into which it grows. Instead, **God gives it a body as he has determined**. As God causes the dead seed to come to life as a plant, he also shapes it into the appropriate form. Thus, in the resurrection believers will have the **kind of body** God has determined they will have. Resurrected bodies will be different from mortal bodies, just as seeds differ from plants. Though Paul did not answer the immediate question, "**What kind of body,**" he showed that God displays his ability and desire to raise the dead each time he grows a seed into a plant.

15:38b-41. To prove further that God is capable of giving resurrected bodies to followers of Christ, Paul listed various natural objects by which God shows his tremendous ability to create different types of bodies. First, **each kind of seed** receives from God **its own body**. Moreover, **all flesh is not the same**. The bodies of **men . . . , animals . . . , birds . . . , fish . . . , heavenly bodies . . . , earthly bodies . . . , the sun . . . , the moon . . . , and the stars** all differ from each other. God does not have any problem coming up with shapes, sizes, and substances for each item in his universe.

Therefore, no one should worry that the lack of an appropriate body will prevent the resurrection of believers.

15:42-44a. Paul concluded (**so**) that just as it is with the varieties of bodies God has already made in the universe, **so it will be with the resurrection of the dead**. He then mentioned four differences that believers may rightly anticipate between their present mortal bodies and those they will receive at the resurrection. First, mortal bodies are **perishable**, subject to illness and death, but resurrected bodies will be **imperishable**. Second, mortal bodies carry **dishonor**, corrupted by sin (compare Rom. 7:17-25), but resurrected bodies carry only **glory**. Third, mortal bodies suffer **weakness** as a result of sin and the Fall (Rom. 8:20-23), but resurrected bodies will be filled with **power** as believers reign with Christ (Rom. 5:17; Eph. 1:20-23; 2:5-7; 2 Tim. 2:12).

Fourth, mortal bodies are **natural**, but resurrected bodies will be **spiritual**. These terms are difficult to define precisely, but there is no justification for believing that Paul contrasted the material and immaterial, or the physical and non-physical. Christ's resurrected body continued to be physical and material, but this physicality had very special characteristics. For example, he was able to appear suddenly (Luke 24:36), even in rooms with locked doors (John 20:19,26), and to vanish just a quickly (Luke 24:31). At the same time, however, he was able to break bread (Luke 24:30), to eat fish (Luke 24:42-43), and to cook and distribute food (John 21:9,13). People were able to touch him (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:38-39; John 20:27). In all likelihood, the term **spiritual** does not refer to "immaterial," but to the Holy Spirit. Believers' resurrected bodies will be **spiritual** because they will be renewed by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11,23; Tit. 3:5-7). Christ's body was raised by the Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11), just as believers' bodies will be.

15:44b-49. The existence of a **natural** (ordinary) **body** necessitates the existence a **spiritual** (renewed by the Holy Spirit) **body**. Paul supported (**so**; "thus" NRSV) this belief with five observations about Adam **written** in the Scriptures. From these five observations Paul drew five conclusions about Christ. Assuming the truthfulness of his earlier comparison between Adam and Christ (15:22), he argued from the lesser to the greater that if something were true of Adam, then something greater would have to be true of Christ.

First, **Adam became a living being** (Gen. 2:7). **The last Adam** (Christ), however, became something much greater: **a life-giving spirit**. In other words, wonderful a creature as Adam was, able to transmit life to his offspring, he hardly compared to Christ who gives eternal life to all those in him (John 17:3; 20:31; Rom. 5:17,21; 6:4,23; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3-4; 1 John 5:20).

Second, the order of the biblical account was important. The **natural** human body preceded **the spiritual** body given by Christ. This fact supports Paul's earlier argument that God will provide a body renewed by the Spirit in the resurrection of believers.

Third, Adam was **of the dust of the earth**, but Christ is **from heaven**. Christ far

exceeds Adam's ordinary human glory because Christ came from heaven (John 1:14; 3:13,31; 6:38; 17:5,22,24).

Fourth, those who are **of the earth** (Adam's descendants) are like **the earthly man** (Adam). They inherit his natural physical nature. Yet, **those who are of heaven** (born from above in regeneration [John 3:3-7; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3,23]) become like **the man from heaven** (Christ). "**From heaven**" (*epouranios*) refers neither to Christ's location of origin nor to his current location, but rather to his nature (compare "heavenly" NASB; NJKV). Believers inherit his spiritual nature.

Fifth, all men **bear the likeness of the earthly man**. The Old Testament not only teaches that human beings are the image of God, but also that they are the images of their human ancestors, including Adam (Gen. 5:3). From this Paul concluded that Christians **bear the likeness of the man from heaven**. Elsewhere, Paul described the ultimate state of salvation as being "conformed to the likeness of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29). To **bear the likeness** of Christ is to reach the zenith of human existence.

15:50. The paragraph divisions of the NIV (compare NASB, NRSV, NKJV) that separate 15:50 from 44a-49 weaken the focus of 15:50. This verse returns the argument to the ideas expressed in 15:42-43, and asserts a further distinction between the natures inherited from Adam and from Christ. Simply put, Paul concluded that mere **flesh and blood, the perishable** physical bodies men receive from Adam, couldn't **inherit the [imperishable] kingdom of God**. God designed something much greater to take place in Christ: the resurrection of the bodies of every believer at the return of Christ. Moreover, those bodies inherited from Adam **cannot inherit the kingdom of God**. Apart from receiving resurrected bodies of an entirely different nature, no one can receive the full blessings of the gospel. Paul appealed to the Corinthians as **brothers** to indicate the intensity with which he wanted them to accept his conclusion (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,58; 16:15).

15:51-52. Continuing with the idea that only those with resurrected bodies can inherit the kingdom of God, Paul assured the Corinthians that believers do not have to die to inherit the kingdom. The natural Corinthian worry over Paul's prior arguments would have been, "But what if Christ comes back before I die? If I haven't died, how can I be raised in a heavenly body and thereby inherit the kingdom of God?" Paul assured his brothers and sisters that even though they would **not all sleep** (i.e. die), they would **all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet**. Paul did not specifically mention Christ's return here, but **the last trumpet** clearly indicates this event, as does the raising of **the dead** (see 15:22-23). Believers alive when Christ returns will be **changed** instantly without dying, receiving heavenly, spiritual, **imperishable** bodies.

15:53-54a. These verses look back to the statements of 15:50 that **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**, and **the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable**. The **perishable, mortal** bodies believers possess according to their

nature in Adam cannot inherit the kingdom of God and live in perfection forever. Believers must have **imperishable** and **immortal** bodies to carry into eternity. Paul did not explain the composition of these bodies, but he indicated that they would be qualitatively different. Most importantly, they would not be subject to death.

15:54b-55. Here Paul looked forward to the fulfillment of two Old Testament prophecies at the general resurrection: “[The Lord] **will swallow up death forever**” (Isa. 25:8); and “**Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?**” (Hos. 13:14). Though he didn’t quote either of these texts precisely, these were unmistakably his references. The wording may represent Paul’s own translation from the Hebrew. His point is clear: because believers’ resurrected bodies will be immortal and imperishable, death will never affect, destroy, or plague them. Believers will live eternally, free from the worry of physical deterioration and death.

Significantly, Paul issued these taunts to death in the present tense. Although the general resurrection had yet to occur, Paul’s confident hope in Christ to bring about the resurrection removed all fear of death. Further, because he understood the general resurrection of believers to be an outworking of Christ’s own resurrection (**the firstfruits** [15:20]), and because Christ’s resurrection had taken place, he saw death already in the process of being defeated.

15:56. Here, Paul introduced some new ideas to both the argument at hand and the letter as a whole. First, **death** results from **sin** (see also Rom. 5:12-19). Disease, decay, violence, and other means may immediately cause death, but these secondary causes would not exist or have **power** without sin as their source.

Second, **sin** inflicts its **sting of death** through **the law** (see also Rom. 5:13; 7:7-11). With the first assertion, Paul began to bring the argument to its conclusion by returning to the issue with which he had begun: the gospel. The resurrection is essential to the gospel that saves believers from their sin (15:3,17). If there is no resurrection, neither is sin defeated. The emergence of the second theme regarding the law, however, seems to have no real antecedent in this letter. It may be that Paul brought in this concept simply because the verse itself was a known slogan. Alternately, or perhaps concurrently, Paul may have associated **the law** with **sin** and **death** so closely that he naturally thought of sin working through the law when he thought of death working through sin.

15:57. This brief doxology of **thanks** to **God** solidifies the gospel allusion in the preceding verse. Of course, the **victory** of which Paul directly spoke was the resurrection of believers, not forgiveness. The **victory** comes through **Jesus Christ** not because he died, but because he was raised from the dead (15:22-23). Because believers are united to Christ, they must necessarily be resurrected as he was (15:21-22).

15:58. Concluding this argument, Paul expressed his concern and love for the

Corinthians by calling them his **dear brothers** (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50; 16:15). This was to remind them that love had motivated him to accost their thinking so severely in the preceding argument. He had been concerned that they were abandoning the gospel (compare 15:2).

He exhorted the Corinthians to **stand firm**, to **hold firmly to the word** he had preached to them (15:2), to guard their belief in the gospel and in the resurrection of believers (15:3-4). He exhorted the true believers to **let nothing move** them because those who denied the resurrection undermined the gospel itself. If the Corinthians let themselves be dragged away by the false teaching, they would deny their only hope for salvation. No matter how persuasive the opposing arguments sounded, the Corinthians were to remember the truth of Christ's resurrection, their union with Christ, and their own future resurrection.

Paul also exhorted them to **give** themselves **fully to the work of the Lord**, knowing that their **labor in the Lord** was **not in vain**. "**Work**" and "**labor**" may pertain to godly works in general, but it is tempting to see them as direct references to gospel ministry. Five of the six other occurrences of "**work**" (*ergon*) (3:13,14,15; 9:1; 16:10) in this letter, and the only other occurrence of "**labor**" (*kopos*) (3:8), refer to gospel ministry.

By telling his **brothers** that their **labor in the Lord** was **not in vain**, Paul alluded once more to the opening verses of this chapter (15:2), encouraging the Corinthians that they had not believed the gospel in vain, and did not hope in it vainly. With these words his argument came full circle, affirming the Corinthians' salvation on the condition that they believed the gospel and stood firm in it.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Baptized for the dead (15:29)

The most obvious meaning of this phrase is that some Corinthians were getting baptized on behalf of others. This reading however, raises significant theological questions. The fact that the Bible refers to this practice only here also complicates the matter, as does Paul's apparently non-critical stance toward it.

Solutions to this dilemma generally relate to the definitions of significant words in the verse. For example, "baptized" (*baptizo*) is read metaphorically as something other than the Christian rite, such as martyrdom or a life a sacrifice (see 10:2: compare Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). "For" (*huper*) may be defined as something other than "in place of" or "on behalf of," such as "above" (suggesting that some Christians were being baptized while standing over graves). Some understand "the dead" (*ton nekron*), or more literally "the corpses," to mean "the bodies that will soon be dead." One solution redefines both *huper* and *ton nekron* to read "with reference to death." A somewhat different approach alters the usual punctuation or syntax, so that "for the dead"

modifies “do” rather than “baptized,” or so that “for the dead” is Paul’s rhetorical response to the question “Why are people baptized?”

A more likely solution is that the Corinthians engaged in vicarious baptism intended to benefit the dead, but that neither Paul nor the church endorsed this practice. While the practice did not convey the benefits the Corinthians thought it conveyed, it was not harmful and thus did not draw Paul’s criticism. This view appeals partly to Paul’s reference to the practitioners of this rite as “they” rather than as “we” or “you.”

In any case, this verse certainly does not teach the Mormon view of baptism for the dead, whereby a living person is baptized substitutionarily, the accruing benefit to a deceased person. If this had been the Corinthians’ position, Paul certainly would have refuted it vigorously.

B. Trumpet (15:52)

In the Old Testament, the trumpet frequently issued commands in battle, such as calls to assemble for war or to attack (Josh. 6:4-5; Judg. 3:27-29; 7:18-22; Neh. 4:20; Job 39:24-25; Jer. 4:19; 42:14; 49:2; 51:27; Ezek. 7:14; 33:3-6). Paul had already referred to this concept in 14:8. The trumpet also announced the anointing of kings (2 Sam. 15:10; 1 Kgs. 1:34,39; 2 Kgs. 9:13), and the coming of the Lord (Exod. 19:16,19; 20:18; 2 Sam. 6:15; Neh. 4:20; Ps. 47:5). All of these coalesce in the idea of the day of the Lord which Paul mentioned earlier in this letter (3:13; 5:5). On the day of the Lord, God will come to earth as a conquering warrior king, saving his people and defeating all his enemies in one fell swoop. The prophets frequently spoke of a trumpet in conjunction with the day of the Lord (Isa. 18:3; 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:14-16; Zech. 9:14), and the New Testament writers echoed this idea (Matt. 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did Paul assume that most of the Corinthians had or had not believed the gospel? What was the gospel message Paul preached?
2. Did Paul try to prove Christ’s resurrection, or did he simply assume that his readers accepted it? In light of this, why do you think Paul wrote this chapter?
3. What sorts of things would be true if Christ had not really been raised from the dead? Do you believe Christ has been raised from the dead? Does your church vigorously teach that Christ has been raised from the dead?
4. How does Christ’s resurrection relate to the resurrection of believers? Is it possible that Christ was raised from the dead, but that believers will exist eternally without bodies? Why or why not? Does your church joyfully teach that believers will have resurrected bodies in eternity?
5. Why is bodily resurrection so important? What’s wrong with the idea that believers will not have bodies in eternity? If you don’t think that having a resurrected body is very exciting or important, why do you think this? Why does Paul not think this?

6. How does knowing that your body will be resurrected make you feel? How does it affect the way you conceive of your being? How does it affect the way you think about death?
7. How will your body be different once it has been resurrected? Are there things about your current body that you will be happy to see changed in your resurrected body?
8. Does the Corinthians' error regarding resurrection shed light on any of their other errors? If so, which ones? Why? Are there other passages in this letter that seem to represent the Corinthians as having an improper view of the body?