

Resurrection Life

I Corinthians 15:12-28, 58

June 8, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Although the doctrine of the resurrection is central to the Christian faith, we often neglect it or understand it in a limited sense. For Paul and the apostles the resurrection was not only a final destination at the end of the world, but a cosmic event that set the world on a new course in the middle of history when Jesus rose from the dead. In order to live fully in the light of Jesus' resurrection, we have to see how it fits in the history of Israel, the life of Christ, the story of the church and the end of time.

WHAT IF HE DIDN'T RISE?

No different than people in our day, the Corinthians had many diverse perspectives, some saying the resurrection of the dead wouldn't happen. The church included Christians with Jewish and pagan backgrounds. Paul says that if Christ rose from the dead, then people must as well, and if there is no resurrection, then Jesus didn't rise (vv12-13). And if Christ didn't rise faith and preaching are empty, apostles are liars, Christianity is worthless, you are still in your sins, dead people are gone forever, and Christians are most pitiable (vv14-19). Paul rejects the notion that it's the thought or idea that counts.

FIRSTFRUITS

Jesus did rise in a physical body and he did so as the *firstfruits*, the beginning of the resurrection to come, the first of those fallen asleep (v20). The idea of firstfruits goes back to the festivals of Passover and Pentecost when Israel would present the first of the barley and wheat crops, respectively, as a token of the greater harvest to follow. Paul applies this festival imagery to Jesus. At his Passover, Calvary and Easter, he triumphed over the great slave masters of sin and death. Just as Adam brought death into the world, so the new Adam brought new life, resurrection, here (v21). As all died in Adam, all will be made alive in Jesus (v22).

SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

What began with Jesus will be completed at his return (v23). After every rule, authority, and power are destroyed, with all enemies subdued under his feet, *then* Jesus will deliver the kingdom to the Father—and the last enemy to be destroyed is death (vv24-28). At the end of this harvest, this transforming process where everything on the earth is brought under the Lordship of Christ, we get new bodies. Notice that the goal is the bodily resurrection of the dead, not a disembodied state in heaven. We're not just passing through because heaven is our home, but looking toward the time when God will "all in all," the fulfillment of the Lord's prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth*" (Matt. 6:10).

NEW BIRTH

Instead of thinking like Greeks that heaven is good and earth is bad, we should think in terms of the biblical story of redemption—good creation, fall, glorified restoration. Individuals are part of redemption but not the only one. In Romans 8 Paul applies Exodus language of bondage and freedom not to the work of Christ or our own personal salvation, but to the liberation of creation. Creation was subject to bondage and decay in hope. It longs for the revealing of the sons of God and freedom from corruption just like we do (vv19-23). What does this process look like? The new creation is forming as mysteriously as a baby inside her mother, and the mother is groaning in childbirth longing to get that thing out (v22). The seedtime, anticipating final harvest, is tumultuous and painful, and we see the continuity and discontinuity between the old creation and the new to come, between our current bodies and our new ones. Paul goes so far as to say we are saved in this hope (v24).

NOT IN VAIN

What you do in the Lord is not in vain because you aren't remodeling a house that is going to be destroyed or restoring a painting that will be burned. You are sowing seed that will be part of the final harvest. Paul tells the entire church to be steadfast because their work in the Lord is *not in vain* which can only be true if this world matters (v58). How this work interfaces with the new creation is mysterious like the nourishment of a baby *in utero*, but the fact that we are in harvest season following Jesus' resurrection from the dead is unmistakable. When Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he found out the kingdom was coming the next day and he said he would plant a tree. As Christians we work because we know where we are in the story—in the middle of God making all things new.