

## XXX. Yes Virginia, There Is a Resurrection

March 18/20, 2014

1 Corinthians 15:12-28

**Aim:** To be assured in the hope of the resurrection, knowing that Jesus Christ reigns now and will defeat all His enemies, including death.

Little did these Corinthians realize that Paul, with the opening words in 15:1-11, had skillfully inserted a hook into their jaw and was about to draw them inexorably to see the monstrous absurdity of their position.

### A. The Consequences of No Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

A number of the Corinthians were having trouble believing in the resurrection of the body (v. 12). They believed Jesus rose from the grave, but they didn't believe His resurrection was the guarantee of their own. Paul attacks their erroneous assumption by showing them they couldn't have it both ways: either dead men do rise, or even Christ Himself didn't rise (vv. 13, 16). And to make sure they would recoil in horror from the basic premise they had adopted, he heaps one dire consequence upon another that would naturally and inevitably follow if Christ did not rise from the dead (vv. 13-19).

#### 1. What the Corinthians Say (15:12)

*<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*

The key to chapter 15 is found in verse 12. The Corinthians believed in Christ's resurrection (vv. 1, 11) and that He was presently alive (emphasized by the perfect tense of *egeirō*, 'has been raised'). How then could they logically deny the general truth of the resurrection? If Christ has been raised, resurrection obviously is possible.

There are two possible reasons underlying this false Corinthian thinking. In Paul's last letter, probably written ten or twelve years later to Timothy, he will speak of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who said 'that the resurrection has already happened' (2 Tim. 2:18). This amounted to a denial of the physical resurrection, probably on the grounds that they were already experiencing the full blessing of the gospel, triumphant over sin, disease, and all of Satan's works in this world. There two may well have had their prototypes at Corinth.

It may be, however, that the traditional Greek division or dualism between body and spirit lies behind their attitude. They believed, perhaps, in the isolated fact of Jesus' return to life after His crucifixion, but did not see that this unique event had any resurrection implications for Christians. As taught by Plato, standard Greek thinking accepted the immortality of the soul, which was degraded by carnal desires and the vicissitudes of life during its imprisonment in the body. If death freed the soul to return to its original state of purity, then the idea of physical resurrection was horrific. A pure soul would want to escape from physicality. Remember how the Athenians mocked Paul when he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:32). Where Greek beliefs inspiring doubts about the resurrection in Corinthian hearts?

It seems strange that some of these believers could have accepted one part of the truth without the other. The cause of this confusion, as of many of their problems, lay in the continuing influence of the pagan philosophies and religions of which many of them had come. The

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

philosophical and spiritualist thought of Paul's day, just as in our own, had many erroneous ideas of what happens to human beings after death.

A basic tenet of much ancient Greek philosophy was dualism, a concept generally attributed to Plato. Dualism considered everything spiritual to be intrinsically good and everything physical to be intrinsically evil. To anyone holding that view the idea of a resurrected body was repugnant. For them, the very reason for going to an afterlife was to escape all things physical. They considered the body a tomb or a corpse to which, in this life, their souls were shackled. For those Greeks, their bodies were the last things they would want to take along to the next life. They believed in the immortality of the soul but strongly opposed the idea of a resurrection of the body (cp. Acts 17:32). The typical view of dualism was expressed by Seneca: 'When the day shall come which shall part this mixture of divine and human here where I found it, I will leave my body, and myself I will give back to the gods.'

So Paul argues that God made both matter and spirit, and that our humanity blends both together. Regeneration is not just renewal of the soul but of the whole person, so that resurrection is a vital part of the Christian's future.

### 2. What the Consequences Are (15:13-19)

#### a) *Consequences for Christ (15:13)*

<sup>13</sup>*But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.*

It is possible that the anti-resurrectionists had no thought through the ramifications of their disbelief. But even if they had, Paul develops his attack by spelling out the most serious consequence of their theory (others will be articulated in the following verses). The logic in his statement is that the alleged impossibility of a final resurrection must deny a particular example – that of Jesus; not even He could have been a positive exception to the negative rule.

It is likely that the disbelieving Corinthians got around that problem by claiming that Christ was not really a man, or was not fully a man. Because of their dualistic orientation, they assumed that because Christ was divine He could not possibly have been human, and therefore only appeared to be human. Consequently He did not really die but only appeared to die. According to this view, His appearances between the crucifixion (an illusion) and the ascension were simply continuing manifestations that only *seemed* to be bodily. But the Corinthians could not fall back on the pagan notion that Christ only appeared to be human. He was fully human. He physically lived and died and lived again. Therefore, if there is no such thing as physical resurrection, 'not even Christ has been raised.'

Paul says once one accepts the flat affirmation that dead don't rise again, one is left with this syllogism: 'Dead men don't rise. Christ was a man. Therefore, Christ Himself didn't rise again!' A blanket denial of the possibility of the resurrection inevitably carries with it the denial of Christ's resurrection.

The Corinthians themselves, of course, had no intention of taking the argument that far, but Paul knew unbelievers wouldn't hesitate to do so! The resurrection of Christ is the pivotal doctrine of Christianity, and we may rest assured unbelievers will miss no opportunity to scuttle it. By saying there is no resurrection of the dead, the Corinthians were providing unbelievers with the very opportunity they were looking for, the opportunity to walk away from Christianity without giving it a second thought.

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

But Paul also knew their own faith would be damage and diminished if they continued to entertain this dangerous idea. No, they weren't denying the resurrection of Jesus at this time, but Paul could see that possibility hovering menacingly on the horizon. For these reasons, Paul couldn't be content merely to point out that their skepticism inevitably led to a denial of Jesus' resurrection. He pressed on to show what a denial of Jesus' resurrection would mean for two basic groups: the bearers of the gospel message and the believing hearers of it.

### *b) Consequences for the Preachers (15:14-15)*

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, two things are undeniably true of them: their ministry is rendered meaningless (v. 14) and even positively evil (v. 15).

#### (1) A Meaningless Ministry (15:14)

*<sup>14</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.*

First, if Jesus did not rise, preaching is a vain and senseless activity. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, there was no message to proclaim. It was all a cruel hoax and all the time and energy he had invested, as well as the sufferings he had endured, were absolutely without meaning. Paul was willing to undergo all these things, and more, because he knew Jesus had risen from the grave. But he would have been a colossal fool to live like this had Jesus not risen!

First, if Christ has not been raised then Paul's preached message (*kērygma*) which earlier he called 'the gospel' (v. 1), is 'empty' or 'vain' (*kenos*) and the Corinthians are putting their trust in futility. This is because that gospel's content is centered on 'He was raised...He appeared.' Take out Christ's resurrection and the message is now void of content, as empty as a bucket with no water.

Apart from the resurrection Jesus could not have conquered sin or death or hell and those three great evils would forever be man's conquerors. Without the resurrection the good news would be bad news, and there would be nothing worth preaching. Without the resurrection the gospel would be an empty, hopeless message of meaningless nonsense. Unless our Lord conquered sin and death, making a way for men to follow in that victory, there is no gospel to proclaim.

Just as no resurrection would make preaching Christ meaningless, it would also make faith in Him worthless. Faith in such a gospel would be 'vain' (*kenos*, empty, fruitless, void of effect, to no purpose). All believers of all ages would have believed for nothing, lived for nothing, and died for nothing.

Preaching and faith are in vain because the message proclaimed and the belief it generated would both be founded on fiction – a religious notion – rather than on historical reality. The skeptics cannot choose to remove this stone from the edifice of their Christian faith and hope to keep the rest of the building intact.

#### (2) A Misrepresenting Ministry (15:15)

*<sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.*

But it is not enough to say the bearers of the gospel have preached and suffered needlessly if Jesus did not rise from the grave. The truth is that in that case they have done great harm. They are actually 'false witnesses.' If Jesus did not rise, the preacher has misrepresented and distorted

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

the whole situation. He has attributed something to God that He did not do, and that is nothing short of blasphemous!

Should the Corinthian skeptics be right, Paul has committed himself to slander and libel, his intended target being none other than God. Because the ‘apostle’ knows that resurrection cannot happen, his proclamation of the risen Jesus is a conspicuous lie. It is obvious that this disagreement about the resurrection was no sincere difference of opinion. If what his adversaries believed – or did not believe – was true, he was lost. If untrue, they were destroying themselves, being self-condemned.

If there is no such thing as resurrection of the dead, then every person who claimed to have witnessed the risen Christ and every person who preached the risen Christ was a liar, including Paul and the other apostles (‘we’). To deny the resurrection is to call the apostles and every other leader of the New Testament church not simply mistaken but willfully mistaken, that is liars. There is no possibility, as many liberals claim, that such a mistake could have been innocent or naïve. Those witnesses could not have been honest men who unwittingly gave bad advice. If Christ was not raised from the dead, they not only were not sent by God with a message from Him, but were liars who would have had to conspire together in order for their lies to have been so consistent and harmonized.

If the apostles, the prophets, and the New Testament writers lied about the heart of the gospel why should they be believed about anything else? Why should their moral teachings be considered inspired and lofty if they so blatantly falsified their teaching about Jesus’ resurrection? All New Testament truth stands or falls together based on the resurrection. Not only that, but those witnesses would have testified, preached, and taught a lie for which they were maligned, beaten, imprisoned, and often martyred. Such self-sacrifice, however, is not the stuff of which charlatans are made. People do not die to preserve a lie. Although Paul does not mention it specifically, it clearly follows that if the resurrection were not true, Christ Himself lied, or at best was tragically mistaken. In either case, He hardly would have qualified as the divine Son of God or the world’s Savior and Lord. Jesus would not have been Victor but victim.

Paul, however, has witnessed to the Corinthians that God has raised Christ, based on Paul’s own encounter with the risen Lord. If this is false it means that Paul has been ‘found’ to be a ‘false witness’ to God’s raising of Christ if, in fact, Christ was not raised.

The universal apostolic testimony is that God raised Christ from the dead, but if that is not true, the apostles are liars and the foundation stones of the church are found to be totally false. They cannot be honest sincere men; they are charlatans.

### *c) Consequences for the Hearers (15:16-19)*

#### *(1) A Futile Faith (15:16-17)*

<sup>16</sup>*For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.* <sup>17</sup>*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.*

In verse 16 Paul restates his major argument. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then sin won the victory over Christ and therefore continues to be victorious over all men. If Jesus remained dead, then, when we die, we too will remain dead and damned.

If Christ has not been raised, there are grave consequences for the Christian faith. Faith in an un-resurrected Christ is ‘futile,’ ‘senseless,’ ‘pointless’ (*mataia*). This word is used of the worship

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

of carved idols that are no gods, that have no existence. Faith in a dead man is just as futile. What help can a corpse give?

Even as verse 16 repeats the thesis of verse 13, so verse 17 repeats verse 14 – but with an elaboration. If the apostles have trafficked in falsehood, their adherents must harm themselves, their faith being ‘worthless’ or unproductive (*mataia*): because a dead Christ cannot help them, they remain guilty sinners.

If Christ was not raised, the Corinthians, and all believers, would ‘still be in their sins,’ remaining unforgiven. On the Day of Judgment those who have passed their days believing they have been forgiven through Christ’s death will discover how cruelly mistaken they have been, facing only the wrath of God.

What consequences befall the believing hearers of the gospel if Jesus did not rise? First, they have no present standing before God. The gospel message begins by declaring that all men stand guilty of sin before a holy God. It moves on to affirm that this holy God has Himself graciously made a way for sinners to be forgiven and to stand clean and guiltless before Him. He sent His own Son into this world to live in perfect obedience to God’s laws and to take the punishment for their sins by dying on the cross. It further states that this Jesus arose from the grave, and His resurrection not only proves He was God in human flesh, but that the work He did for sinners was approved and accepted by God the Father. The gospel message also declares that all those who will turn from their sins in true repentance and place their faith wholly in what Jesus did for sinners will be forgiven of their sins and freed from God’s just condemnation.

But if Jesus’ body decayed away in that Palestinian tomb, all of this goes right out of the window! If Jesus didn’t rise, the whole grand scheme of redemption comes crashing down, and believing the gospel message is senseless and meaningless. And if the gospel message is not true, the sinner is right back to square one. He is still standing before a holy God without any provision for His sins!

Faith’s validity is tested by the reality of its object. It is not just faith for faith’s sake, but faith in the crucified Christ that produces forgiveness of sins, and faith in the risen Christ that creates newness of life. A dead Christ means no forgiveness, no deliverance from sin’s penalty at the hand of God’s wrath, and no power of sin’s tyranny in our everyday experience.

### (2) A Comfortless Faith (15:18)

<sup>18</sup>*Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.*

In the next place, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, the believer has absolutely no hope for the future of his loved ones. What a comfort it is to know we shall see our Christian loved ones again! But if Jesus Christ did not rise, it is a false hope! Paul says if Christ did not rise, our loved ones are lost forever!

Those who have ‘fallen asleep,’ that is, who died ‘in Christ’ (i.e., as Christians), will prove to have been lost. Instead of the comforting hope for deceased loved ones who died in Christ, that we will see them again in the Kingdom, we will find to our horror that like us they, too, are lost.

‘Fallen asleep’ does not refer to what is often called soul sleep but was a common euphemism for death. If there is no resurrection, every saint, Old Testament or Christian, who had died would have forever ‘perished.’ Paul himself, the other apostles, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Moody, and every other believer of every other age would spend eternity in torment,

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

without God and without hope. Their faith would have been in vain, their sins would have been unforgiven, and their destiny would be damnation.

Furthermore, a dead Jesus means that ‘those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.’ Death and sin are partners: if sin persists, without being forgiven, then death triumphs. All the Christians who died in the faith of Christ, falling asleep in the body but believing that they would wake in God’s presence, in eternal life, would have been deluded. Thus Christians are twice losers, renouncing the life-style of a rebellious world and for a heaven that does not exist.

In a context such as this, ‘destroyed’ does not mean the annihilation of both body and soul. As in the New Testament generally, destruction is taken as the antithesis of salvation, separation from God in a state of lasting misery. Scripture neither implies nor teaches that final judgment leads to the obliteration and non-existence of the unforgiven sinner.

### (3) A Hopeless Faith (15:19)

*<sup>19</sup>If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

Did their preoccupation with spiritual gifts lead the Corinthians to think that this life in the here and now was all that mattered, so that it was immaterial whether or not Christ was raised? Were that the case their assurance of forgiveness is a delusion and their hope for the salvation of the deceased would be a delusion. What pathetic creatures they would be, living a life based on assurance and hope, if there was no basis for that assurance and hope, the resurrection of Christ from the dead. There is no true faith without genuine hope and there is no hope without Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

Without the resurrection, and the salvation and blessings it brings, Christianity would be pointless and pitiable. Without the resurrection we would have no Savior, no forgiveness, no gospel, no meaningful faith, no life, and no hope of any of those things. To have ‘hoped in Christ in this life only’ would be to teach preach, suffer, sacrifice, and work entirely for nothing. If He is not alive, where would be our source of peace, joy, or satisfaction *now*. The Christian life would be a mockery, a charade, a tragic joke.

Finally, without the resurrection of Jesus, the Christian not only has no hope for his dead loved ones, he also has no hope for himself. Without the resurrection, Paul says the Christian is ‘the most pitiable’ of all men! What Paul means is that to undergo suffering for Christ now is nonsensical if there is no eternal reality. We are to be pitied because we are deluded and cheated. Take away the resurrection of Jesus and the Christian has no longer has an endless hope, but a hopeless end!

Their wretchedness must be total, in that earthbound happiness, quite apart from any expectation of salvation, draws its strength from a delusion. Because resurrection is a mirage, the ‘apostles’ who could not have been sent by a dead non-Christ, will attract nothing but the just ridicule of society. Nor will God help them. Worse, they will have no expectation for the future. Without the risen Christ there is nothing.

Why did Paul believe the resurrection of Jesus to be absolutely essential to salvation? Firstly, the empty tomb demonstrates that God acknowledged the sufferings of Jesus to be exactly what they were intended by the Lord to be: His unique and effective sacrifice for the sins of others. Had Jesus not been raised, it would have been as if God ratified the condemnation passed upon

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

Him by the Jews and others. Secondly, Jesus' resurrection anticipated His ascent into heaven to present himself before God on behalf of those for whom He died.

### **B. The Consummation of Christ's Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)**

Verses 20-28 are a short history of Death. Paul indicates in these verses that the final stage of the plan of redemption and the end of the present world order have already commenced: just as Christ was raised by God, so the church will be raised.

#### **1. Christ, the Firstfruits (15:20)**

<sup>20</sup>*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

'But now' (*nyni de*) means 'this is how matters are.' Paul has shown that God did not abandon Christ in the tomb and has advanced testimonies to this effect (15:5-8). Therefore, the schismatics' view is wrong and negative inferences flowing from their assumption must be discarded. Jesus remains in a state of 'risen-ness.' This is the last occasion in the chapter in which the resurrection of the Lord is mentioned, the reason being that Paul is no longer defensive: assuming the reality of the empty tomb, he will detail its consequences for believers.

Paul really wants his readers to feel the force of his 'all or nothing' argument. The resurrection is a key battleground evangelistically, because if you do not believe it happened there is no logical reason to accept God's grace in the gospel and to submit to Christ as Lord. But if it *did* happen, then His claims are proven, and everything else in Christian discipleship flows from this fundamental reality. After taking us through a scenario where there is no faith, no trust, no forgiveness, and no hope of eternal life, because there is no resurrection, Paul therefore states with resounding confidence that Christ has in fact been raised from the dead.

Jesus' original design in coming demands the resurrection of His people. Jesus came into this world for the specific purpose of being 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.' Paul knew that Jesus' resurrection was not just an isolated, solitary fact of history, but it was the first of a whole crop of resurrections!

'Firstfruits' were a token of the harvest that was to come and a joyful thanksgiving to the Lord for His faithfulness in providing another year's crops. The resurrection of Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection of all His redeemed people who have 'fallen asleep' in Him. As in 15:6, 18 (cp. Mt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 2 Pe. 3:4), 'those who are asleep' refers to the righteous dead whose spirits have gone to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; cp. Phil. 1:23) but whose remains are in the grave, awaiting recomposition and resurrection.

In the Old Testament, the presentation of the 'firstfruits' of the land by Israel had dual significance: the act pledged the coming harvest to God, but in belief that He would honor His pledge of a harvest. Paul's letters advance both principles.

Before Israelites harvested their crops they were to bring a representative sample, called the firstfruits, to the priests as an offering to the Lord (Lev. 23:10). The full harvest could not be made until the firstfruits were offered. That is the point of Paul's figure here. Christ's own resurrection was the firstfruits of the resurrection 'harvest' of the believing dead. In His death and resurrection Christ made an offering of Himself to the Father on our behalf.

The significance of the firstfruits, however, not only was that they preceded the harvest but that they were a first installment of the harvest. The fact that Christ was 'the firstfruits' therefore

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

indicates that something else, namely the harvest of the rest of the crop, is to follow. In other words, Christ's resurrection could not have been in isolation from ours. His resurrection *requires* our resurrection, because His resurrection was part of the larger resurrection of God's redeemed.

### 2. Christ, the Second Adam (15:21-23)

#### a) Adam and Christ (15:21-22)

<sup>21</sup>For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

But why is Jesus the firstfruits of the dead? Why should His resurrection guarantee the resurrection of His people? Paul says it was by man that death came into the world in the first place; it is by man that death is defeated. Doesn't it make sense for death to be ended in the same way it was started?

'By a man came death' is Paul's shorthand for the Genesis 3 account of the Fall of mankind from the state of innocence in the garden to the sinful corruption of human nature due to disobedience. Adam was the man who brought death upon the whole human race. In God's scheme of things, Adam was no ordinary man. He was not only the first man ever to live; he was also the representative head of the human race. In other words, what Adam did counted for the whole human race. Of course, we know from the record in Genesis that Adam disobeyed God and the consequence of that disobedience was death.

All 'in Adam' – that is, the totality of the human race – die. Because mankind was contained, so to speak, in its first parent, alienation from God and physical death because universal and permanent when the first man apostatized. And Paul is consistent: he does not write that Adam's race 'sleeps,' reserving this description for believers only.

Just as Adam was the progenitor of everyone who dies, so Christ is the progenitor of everyone who will be raised to life. In each case, one man doing one act caused the consequences of that act to be applied to every other person identified with him. Those who are identified with Adam—every person who has been born—is subject to death because of Adam's sinful act. Likewise, those who are identified with Christ—every person who has been born again in Him—is subject to resurrection to eternal life because of Christ's righteous act. 'In Adam all' have inherited a sin nature and therefore will die. 'In Christ all' who believe in Him have eternal life, and shall be made alive, in body as well as in spirit.

Through the first man Adam, Death entered history. The seed of every man and woman in history was present in Adam, so that all people owe their life and their physical descent to that man. But because of his sin, Adam's seed was infected with the fatal virus called 'Death' so that all people must die. The man Christ, however, has been raised from the dead, making possible the resurrection of the dead for others.

Adam introduced Death, but the Christ will abolish Death. And the reason? It is because *Christ* has been raised from the dead on Easter day that *all* will be raised alive on the last day. Here Paul uses the language of the firstfruits reaped early in anticipation of the whole harvest. Paul is not addressing the question of the judgment of all people at the general resurrection (see e.g., 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:10). Rather, Paul is ignoring the future of the unbeliever and concentration on the

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

abolition of Death for those who are ‘in Christ.’ Those who have died ‘in Christ’ are said to be ‘asleep,’ ready and waiting to be roused from sleep by the Lord at His coming.

Paul’s point is that Jesus came into this world as the second and last representative head. There will never be another representative head for human beings. There are, however, some major differences between Adam’s headship and Christ’s. One is that while Adam represented every single human being without exception, Christ represents only those who belong to Him. That is why Paul doesn’t merely speak about all who have died but those who have ‘fallen asleep in Christ’ (v. 18; cp. v. 20). And that is why Paul also reserves future hope only for those ‘who are Christ’s’ (v. 23).

The two categories of human nature are to be carefully distinguished here. Every human being is ‘in Adam’ and therefore subject to death, but it is only for those who are ‘in Christ’ that there is life.

From countless other passages of Scripture we know that the two ‘alls’ in verse 22, though alike in some aspects, cannot be equal. Those who attempt to read universalism into this passage must contradict those other passages that teach reprobation (Mt. 5:29; 10:28; 25:41, 46; Lk. 16:23; 2 Th. 1:9; Rev. 20:15; etc.). The ‘alls’ are alike in that they both apply to descendants. Every human being is a descendant of Adam, and therefore the first ‘all’ is universal. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ, however, are *His* descendants (as illustrated in John 8:44), and the second ‘all’ therefore applies only to the saved. Through Adam’s sin, man died spiritually and became subject to death bodily. Likewise, through Christ believers are given life spiritually and will be raised bodily. But our spirits, because they go to be with the Lord at death, will not wait to be resurrected. Only our bodies will be resurrected, and that truth is stressed here.

A second major difference between Adam and Christ is that while Adam’s headship resulted in death for those he represented, Christ’s headship results in life for His people. By denying the resurrection of the body, the skeptical Corinthians were, in effect, striking a blow at the very heart of the whole plan of redemption. In separating Christ’s resurrection from their own, they were separating Christ from the very people He came to represent! And without Christ representing His people, the whole plan of redemption falls to the ground.

### *b) Christ and His People (15:23)*

<sup>23</sup>*But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.*

Paul seems to be anticipating a possible objection. How can you be so sure of something you have not seen or experienced personally? After all, Christians ‘in Christ’ still die and we do not see them ‘made alive’ as yet. So, Paul reminds his readers that this is a process; a process that is certainly begun, and inevitably proceeding, but as yet is far from complete. It is not yet the time for Christians to receive their resurrection bodies. ‘Christ the firstfruits’ has started the process and nothing can undo that, but its fulfillment in resurrection will be for ‘those who belong to Christ,’ only ‘at His coming.’

‘Order’ (*tagma*) means ‘sequence.’ Paul shows that Jesus’ resurrection must lead to the resurrection of all who belong to Him, but at a later time. Whereas some at Corinth repudiate belief in the resurrection, the apostle demonstrates that although sin and death have not yet been banished, the axe has been laid to the root of the tree in that the crucified Christ lives. Although the resurrection of Christ and that of believers are in principle one single event, it is an event

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

considered sequentially in two stages: initially, the historic glorification of Christ; and ‘next,’ and of necessity, that of the church. The second stage will occur ‘at his arrival (*parousia*).’

There is a divine order or sequence of events that will culminate in the abolition of Death. Christ, the firstfruits, has already been raised at the first Easter, as Paul reminded them in verse 4. This is an accomplished fact of history. But still in the future is another historical event, Christ’s ‘coming’ (*parousia*). This word, which is regularly used of Christ’s return, was often employed for the grand appearing of an emperor or other high dignitary. At His ‘coming’ those who belong to the Christ, that is, those who are ‘asleep in Him,’ will, as He was, be raised from the dead.

### 3. Christ, the Final King (15:24-28)

Paul argues here that Jesus’ resurrection guarantees that of believers because the final disposition of His kingdom demands it. Paul makes three truths exceedingly clear in verses 24-28: Christ has received a kingdom from the Father; He is now ruling and reigning in that kingdom until He has subdued all His enemies; He will at some point in the future hand that kingdom over to the Father.

#### a) *The End of Time (15:24a)*

<sup>24</sup>*Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father...*

‘Then comes the end.’ Then follows ‘the End’ (*telos*), a word for ‘goal’ or ‘end-point,’ but which has the idea of ‘perfection’ (cp. 13:10). It means the conclusion, or even the intended completion of a program. With His people resurrected and secure in His presence, the final scenes of the cosmic drama will be played out, as Jesus Christ is revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords, taking His power to reign in sovereign authority eternally.

*Telos* (‘end’) not only can refer to that which is final but also to that which is completed, consummated, or fulfilled. At the ‘end’ all things will be restored as they were originally designed and created by God to be. In the end it will be as it was in the beginning. Sin will be no more, and God will reign supremely, without enemy and without challenge. That gives us great insight into the divine redemptive plan. Here is the culmination: Christ turns over the restored world to God His Father, who sent Him to recover it.

To redeem something is to buy it back, or to bring it back under original ownership. This is what God is doing in His plan of redemption. He is bringing all things back to the point at which human history began. Before Adam sinned, everything in this world was in perfect submission to God, but by that one act of sin, Adam introduced rebellion against God into the human race. God’s plan of redemption, which existed even before Adam sinned, was designed to bring everything back into that state of submission.

How was this redemption to be accomplished? The Bible tells us God the Father commissioned His only Son to come into the world to set up a kingdom. This kingdom is both an accomplished fact and an ongoing process. His kingdom was established by His death on the cross, and He even now rules and reigns in the hearts of all who have placed their faith and trust in Him. But even though the forces of evil have been decisively defeated, they continue their struggle against the kingdom of Christ to this present hour.

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

### b) *The End of Enemies (15:24b-25)*

...after destroying every rule and every authority and power. <sup>25</sup>For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

The Kingship of Christ is expressed in verse 25 in a direct quotation of Psalm 110:1, which is the Old Testament text most quoted in the New Testament. In this quote, the Lord God promises His anointed one (the Messiah) total sovereignty in mighty victory over all His foes.

Paul identifies the ‘enemies’ of the Christ as various malevolent spiritual forces, whom he calls ‘all rule,’ ‘all authority,’ ‘power,’ and ‘death’ itself. What Paul means here are all the powers, human or spiritual, which are hostile to God’s rule and opposed to His sovereignty. These are the enemies over whom Christ must reign as king until they are all finally abolished. Christ exercises His kingly rule and abolishes these powers through the preaching of the gospel of Himself crucified and risen.

Christ’s final act will be to conquer permanently every ‘enemy’ of God, every contending ‘rule’ and ‘authority’ and ‘power.’ They will forever be abolished, never to exist again, never again to opposed God or to deceive, mislead, or threaten His people or corrupt any of His creation.

The kingdom of Christ has many enemies. There is sin and all its various manifestations. Then there is Satan and all the hosts of demons. However, the struggle against the forces of evil, thank God, is not going to last forever. Paul says a time is coming when Jesus will finally put all His enemies under His feet. At that point, the goal of redemption will be realized.

### c) *The End of Death (15:26)*

<sup>26</sup>*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Although physical death was overcome by Christ in His person when He rose, it holds sway elsewhere – yet only because it is permitted to retain its grip. When Jesus comes, it will be annihilated.

Death is the last great enemy because it continues throughout history until the Lord of life appears at His second coming, but at that moment death itself will be destroyed. Then the firstfruits will culminate in the full harvest as His people are raised in their resurrection bodies, eternally alive in the heavenly kingdom.

For Paul death was *unnatural*, a malevolent spiritual enemy, a blight caused by sin, the last and most formidable enemy of God. Death ‘is being abolished’ (*katargeitai*, present passive tense) by God because the risen Christ is reigning as king (present tense). But Death will finally and visibly be removed at the coming of Christ.

Paul makes special mention of one enemy in particular: death. This terrible enemy that was brought upon the human race by sin is going to be the very last enemy that is destroyed before the Lord Jesus hands His kingdom over to the Father. Why did Paul make specific mention of death? It was to show the Corinthians how foolish they were to argue against the resurrection of the body. By saying their bodies would not rise from the dead, they were essentially arguing that death was going to have the final word and that at least one of Christ’s enemies would avoid subjection. Paul, on the other hand, says death is also going to be brought into subjection to Christ. This would be impossible if even one body belonging to Him remains in the grave! For Jesus’ victory over His enemies to be complete, the bodies of the saints have to be raised. Death must not have the final word. Thank God, it will not!

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

### d) *The End of Christ's Reign (15:27-28)*

#### (1) God Placed All Things Under Christ (15:27)

<sup>27</sup>For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.

In this great climactic moment another Old Testament promise will be fulfilled: ‘you have put all things under His feet’ (Ps. 8:6). In context, this refers to ‘man,’ and, in its fulfillment it is the ‘proper man,’ Christ Jesus, who assumes that rule and regains that lost authority. He has already accomplished all this through His death and resurrection. All that we wait for is the day of His revelation or ‘unveiling,’ when His plans are finally executed.

It was God who placed all things under Christ’s feet. It was only ever a *delegated* rule, not an autonomous one. Paul here appeals to Psalm 8:6. Paul does not quote, but rather echoes that text in his own words, ‘All things *are put* in subjection to Him,’ that is by God. God is not among the ‘all things’ that are subject to Christ. Rather, *God* placed Christ over the works of God’s hands.

God the Father is the exception who will not be subject to Christ, for it is the Father who gave the rule and authority to the Son (Mt. 28:18; Jn. 5:27), and whom the Son faithfully and perfectly served. Because God the Father cannot be subjected to the Son, in the glory of heaven Jesus will be subordinate to His Father, even as, say, Joseph, de facto lord of Egypt, was subordinate to Pharaoh.

#### (1) Christ Will Subject Himself to God (15:28)

<sup>28</sup>When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

When all things are brought into subjection to Jesus, all that will be left for Him to do is to hand the kingdom He has established over to the Father.

Once the enemies of God including Death are finally vanquished by the Son, He will hand over His kingship to the Father and be subject to Him. The humility and obedience of Christ shown in His incarnation and dreadful death (Phil. 2:5-8; cp. 2 Cor. 8:9; 10:1) is shown also in His voluntary subjection to the Father once His work of ruling is completed.

Within this passage the final victory over all hostile powers and the establishment of God’s eternal rule is attributed both to the Father and the to the Son. Jesus Christ destroys all His enemies, but the Father puts all things under His feet. This is not to be read as implying and division between the persons of the Trinity, or to suggest that the Son is inferior to the Father, in any respect. But there is a differentiation of functions or role, in the great outworking of God’s salvation plan. The Father sent the Son into the world to carry out the great plan of salvation, through His perfect deity and humanity. With that plan complete, the kingdom will then have come in all its fullness, so that the Son will be able to present His finished work, His completed task, to the Father, whose will He has perfectly carried out. He will hand the kingdom over to the Father, who had handed over everything to Him.

No longer is Jesus required to exercise authority, alike in judgment and in the outworking of salvation. Yet He remains the eternally divine Son of God and by incarnation the human head of the church. If ‘God’ points to the Father alone, the meaning would be that the Trinity is to be

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 30

worshiped by the holy angels and a church restored fully and eternally from sin. Nothing can disturb the glory of the new creation.

From the time of His incarnation until the time when He presents the kingdom to the Father, Christ is in the role of a Servant, fulfilling His divine task as assigned by His Father. But when that final work is accomplished, He will assume His former, full, glorious place in the perfect harmony of the Trinity. Christ will continue to reign, because His reign is eternal (Rev 11:15), but He will reign with the Father in Trinitarian glory, subject to the Trinity in that way eternally designed for Him.

From that moment God will be ‘all in all,’ which is Paul’s idiomatic way of saying that God will reign supreme over all that is evil and that has been opposed to Him.

The end point is then defined – ‘that God may be all in all.’ Such a consummation almost defies description, but we can know that it means that there will be no area of created existence where God’s will is anything other than totally sovereign, where all resistance has been quelled and all enemies destroyed. With this totality will come perfect unity. Everything that hurts and harms, by division, will be gone and the perfect unity of the three Persons of the undivided Trinity will be expressed in their sovereign rule of love, over a perfectly united, resurrected people, in a perfectly appointed universe, a new heavens and a new earth which are the home of righteousness (see 2 Pe. 3:11-13).

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 15:29-49.