

“For He Must Reign”

The Thirtieth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 15:20-28; Job 19:23-29

Paul has made his case that the Christian faith stands or falls based upon whether or not Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Paul has told the Corinthians that the gospel he preached to them, which they accepted as true, is grounded in the facts of Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures. If Jesus Christ was bodily raised from the dead, then Christianity is true, and so is the gospel the Corinthians accepted. But if Jesus did not rise again from the dead, then Christianity is false and the Corinthians have believed that gospel in vain, because a dead savior cannot save anyone if he can’t even save himself. Having affirmed that Jesus Christ did rise again from the dead, Paul now addresses the relationship between Jesus Christ’s own death and resurrection, and our bodily resurrection at the end of the age. And this brings us to Paul’s discussion of the second coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, and the course of redemptive history in between.

We are nearing the end of our study of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, as we make our way through 1 Corinthians 15, one of the most important chapters in all the Bible. We have covered Paul’s discussion of the gospel in verses 1-11, as well as Paul’s treatment of the fact of the resurrection in verses 12-19. And then in verses 29-34, we saw that for Paul, the resurrection is the basis for Christian ethics because the resurrection not only establishes the truth of Christianity, it gives meaning and purpose to everything we do. Unlike the pagans, who see death as that moment when the soul is finally liberated from the body (and its bodily urges), Christians anticipate the resurrection of our bodies, when God rejoins body and soul which have been torn apart by death. It is here that we find our hope for the future. Not having such hope, pagans can only live for the moment—“eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

Christians, however, look ahead to that glorious day when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and to make all things new. We live our daily lives in light of that great event yet to come. This gives everything we do meaning and purpose. So, in this sermon we turn our attention to verses 20-28 of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul briefly maps out the course of the future period of time between Christ’s own resurrection that first Easter and the last day, when Jesus returns, and all those who have died in Christ are raised from the dead.

Although Bible prophecy devotees run wild with all kinds of speculation about the Rapture, the antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, and a future millennial kingdom in which lions lie down with lambs and where Jesus rules the world from the city of Jerusalem, when Paul maps out the course of the future, none of these things are mentioned. For Paul, our hope is grounded in Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead, which is the first-fruits of the great harvest yet to come, the general resurrection at the end of the age, when Jesus Christ returns and all of human history comes to its final climax.

So, as we take up our text, we backtrack a bit to cover verses 20-28, in which Paul lays out the course of the future—beginning with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout the preceding verses (12-19), Paul has set out a series of hypothetical situations to make his point—“if Jesus Christ is not raised then you are still in our sins and it might as well be ‘eat and drink for tomorrow we die, because this life is all that there is.’” But in verse 20, Paul answers these hypothetical questions by reminding the Corinthians of the fact of our Lord’s resurrection. Jesus Christ’s bodily resurrection from

the dead constitutes the first fruits of a great harvest yet to come. This means that our Lord's resurrection guarantees the final harvest (resurrection) of all those who are his. Christ's resurrection from the dead is the proof that his redemptive work (as the second Adam) overturns the effects of the curse resulting from Adam's fall into sin. For Paul, Jesus Christ is Lord over all things, even death. And this is where we as Christians find our hope and purpose in life.

In verse 20, Paul asserts what by now should be obvious—*“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* Christians are not to be pitied more than all men. Far from it, the tomb is empty, and Jesus has shown himself to be alive to all of the apostles, to over five-hundred people at one time, as well as the Apostle Paul himself. The resurrection of Jesus is an established fact. Therefore, Paul's argument in verses 20-28 stands in sharp contrast to the hypothetical assertions made in the previous verses. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. And for Paul, this fact not only establishes the truth of Christianity but, as we'll see shortly. It is the basis for many of Paul's distinctive doctrinal emphases.

Once again, Paul uses the perfect tense of the verb (“has been raised”) to make the critical point that Jesus Christ's own resurrection from the dead is an on-going condition—Jesus *is* the Risen Lord (and continues to be) the Risen Lord because he has conquered death and the grave once for all. Since Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, he remains the risen and ascended Lord. This is why Jesus Christ's resurrection plays such a major role in Paul's theology, precisely because it lies at the heart of the gospel, it is the foundation for Christian hope (just as our Lord was raised from the dead, so too shall we), and it is the basis for Christian ethics—because Jesus has been raised, everything we do matters because we must live this life in the light of the next.

There are three important aspects to this. First, Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as the “first fruits” of a much larger harvest yet to come. This is an important category through which to consider the full impact of the resurrection. When viewed against the background of the Old Testament, where the first sheaf of the harvest was brought to the temple so as to consecrate the entire harvest of grain which had not yet ripened or been harvested, so too, Christ's resurrection consecrates the entire harvest of those who also will be raised from the dead—that is, all of the elect, who are already seen as “raised with Christ” (cf. Ephesians 2:4-7).¹ Although the point is so obvious, it is easy to overlook. The very fact that the resurrection constitutes the “first fruits” of a much larger harvest, guarantees that there will be a much larger harvest yet to come. For starters, this should give us great optimism as far as the missionary enterprise is concerned, because the great multitude before the throne who are raised with Christ is so vast they cannot be counted (cf. Revelation 7:9). The harvest will be huge.

Second, the fact of the resurrection not only serves as the guarantee of the future bodily resurrection of Christian believers at the end of the age, the New Testament is filled with references to the fact that Christ's own resurrection the first Easter is the basis for the New Testament's repeated assertion that the believer *has already been* raised with Christ. Christ's bodily resurrection in the past, not only points us ahead to the future, it gives life meaning now. Because of what Jesus has already done for us in conquering death and the grave, this establishes what is yet to come—that we too will be raised bodily from the dead on the last day. This is why Paul can repeatedly speak of Christian believers as presently seated and raised with Christ in heavenly places. This is what we mean when we speak of the already/not

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 209.

yet distinction found throughout the New Testament.² Because we are “in Christ” and already seen as seated with him in heavenly places, we can be assured of the promise of the not yet—the resurrection of our bodies—a theme we’ll take up next time, Lord willing, when we talk about the nature of the resurrection body (vv. 35-58).

To put it yet another way, the first coming of Jesus Christ and his resurrection means that in the present age, every Christian believer is said to be *already* raised with Christ. Christ’s resurrection from the dead also ensures that the believer also will be raised (bodily) at the end of the age. Not only does the resurrection establish proof of Jesus’ deity—that he is God in human flesh whose death upon the cross for us and in our place accomplishes our salvation—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead marks a major turning point in redemptive history. When Jesus leaves the tomb this is the birthday of the new creation—the beginning of the end, the dawn of the final era in redemptive history.

Third, by conquering death, and ushering in a new and final era of redemptive history, Christians having been living in the last days from the time of Jesus and the apostles. In the meantime, we await the end of the age when Jesus returns. This too is implied when Paul speaks of Christ’s resurrection as the “firstfruits.” Although the term “firstfruits” in 1 Corinthians 15:20 ff., is commonly understood to refer to the fact that Christ’s resurrection is chronologically prior to all those who will rise after him (i.e., it comes first), Paul’s use of the term “first fruits,” is intended to demonstrate an organic unity between Christ and his people who have been raised with him in his own resurrection. Jesus might be the first to rise from the dead, but he is not the last. All those who are his, will rise with him.

The language of “first fruits” therefore indicates that Christ’s resurrection marks the initial resurrection from a whole group to follow (the harvest). Our Lord’s “resurrection is the representative beginning of the resurrection of believers.”³ All those who are united to Jesus Christ through faith are, in some sense, raised with Christ, when Jesus himself is raised from the dead. Jesus not only died for us, he was raised for us. This is what Paul is getting at when in verse 22 he says, “*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*” This is also why Paul can speak of believers already being raised with Christ and seated in the heavenlies even while they are still living (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1). Because believers have been raised with Christ and are united to him through faith, even now we participate in our Lord’s resurrection as citizens of the age to come (a point Paul makes directly in Philippians 3:20-21). When Jesus was raised from the dead, a new and final age in redemptive history dawned. This also means that Christ’s resurrection guarantees our resurrection.

In verses 21-22, Paul now sets out his two-Adams contrast as the key to understanding redemptive history—the same thing he does in Romans 5:12-21. In verse 21, Paul begins to develop this theme. “*For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.*” Since death is the penalty for Adam’s violation of the terms of the covenant of works, and comes to us through Adam—death was passed on to all of Adam’s descendants—the reversal of the consequences of the curse (death) must also come through a man (the second Adam, Jesus Christ).

Since Adam acted as the federal and biological head of all those under the covenant of works (the entire

² Richard B. Gaffin, Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1987), 60.

³ Gaffin, Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology, 34.

human race), Adam brought the curse down upon all those whom he represents (all of humanity). So too, the redemption of the human race—in the form of a once for all sacrifice for sin, and in the resurrection from the dead—must also come through a man, the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Jesus accomplishes his redemptive work on behalf of all those whom he represents under the covenant of grace. Our redemption depends upon our Lord’s incarnation (“a man”) and the facts of the gospel, culminating in Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead. Jesus, the second Adam, undoes what the first Adam brought down upon us.

This is why Paul contrasts the effects of the fall in verse 22, with the work of Jesus Christ (the second Adam) in undoing the effects of the fall of the human race into sin. “*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*” Paul summarizes the consequences of Adam’s fall—he plunged the entire human race into sin and death. We will all die because of Adam’s act of rebellion. Under the covenant of works, Adam represented all men and women, so the effects of Adam’s act of rebellion extend to all human beings without exception. Likewise, all those raised by the second Adam (Jesus) will be made alive (the elect—those redeemed by Christ). That Christ’s representation extends to all those whom he represents under the covenant of grace and not the entire human race (“all”), can be seen by the context (the effects of sin and the effects of Christ’s resurrection). Adam represents the entire human race. Jesus represents all those given him by the father. The two Adams stand in complete contrast to one another.

This becomes clear in the very next verse, when Paul (v. 23) speaks of the fruit of the harvest as those who “belong to Christ.” “*But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.*” For Paul, the harvest begins with Christ’s bodily resurrection, but the harvest does not come in all at once. In fact, although the full harvest is guaranteed, the harvest does not come in until the end of the age when Jesus returns. Because the events connected to the harvest will occur in a particular sequence, Paul must now lay out a brief map of the future—that time between Christ’s resurrection and our own—the present evil age.

The word translated “in order” is the Greek word *tagma*, [*tagmati*]. It is a military term which referred to a detachment of soldiers. Each “group” or detachment, participates in the harvest in its proper order. How we understand this order of events helps to determine whether or not one is premillennial (Jesus returns and established his 1000 year rule on the earth) or amillennial (Jesus currently reigns over all things and returns to establish a new heaven and earth, not a millennial kingdom).

Clearly the first “tagma” (detachment) is Jesus Christ, who is the first fruits of the harvest. Although it would be unusual to speak of only one person constituting a “tagma” (a detachment), remember that in his resurrection Jesus Christ represents all those who are raised in him (believers). The first tagma then is Christ’s bodily resurrection and those who are raised in him, which ensures the second *tagma*, our own bodily resurrection at the end of the age. The starting point on Paul’s map of redemptive history is Jesus’ resurrection the first Easter.

The second group [*tagma*] is composed of “those who belong to Christ” “at his coming,” i.e., at his second advent. This means that Paul sees Christ’s resurrection and the final harvest as serving as two redemptive-historical bookends. On the one end (the starting point), we have Christ’s bodily resurrection (in which all believers are raised, and seated with Christ in the heavenlies), and on the other end (the destination), we have the bodily resurrection of believers at the end of the age (the harvest).⁴ This understanding of Christ’s resurrection anticipating our own resurrection precludes all forms of

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, p. 211.

millennialism (pre or post) because there is no mention anywhere in the New Testament of golden age for Christianity upon the earth between Christ's resurrection the first Easter and the resurrection at the end of the age. Rather, Paul implies that we live in the age of the church militant, as we struggle with unbelief, heresy and false doctrine, and persecution of unbelievers, while we await our Lord's return.

In verse 24, Paul speaks of the final destination on his redemptive-historical map. *"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power."* The key is the meaning of the word *eita*, "then." Although premillennarians claim otherwise, this does not indicate that what follows in verses 24-26 is a third *tagma*, (i.e., a millennial reign of Jesus Christ upon the earth after he returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new). Rather, it means that those things listed in verse 24 ff. occur at the time of the events described in the preceding verses. In other words, when the dead are raised, *then* the end has come and the conditions set out in the following verses will become a reality. The final event in human history is Jesus' return to earth to bring an end to human existence as we now know it.

The critical point is that by the end (when Jesus comes back) Christ's kingdom has conquered all of God's enemies, including the greatest of our enemies, which is death (as spelled out in verses 25-26). *"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."* The imperative in verse 25 is hard to miss—Jesus *must* reign (in heaven) until that time that his kingdom has conquered his enemies and he returns to earth to judge the world, raise the dead and restore all things. The imagery Paul uses reminds us of Job's hope (as spelled out in Job 19, our Old Testament lesson) that one day we will be raised bodily from the dead and see God with our own eyes. The fact that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, means that Paul must be referring here to our Lord's Second Advent and the resurrection, the final judgment, and the creation of a new heavens and earth—the final consummation of all things.

Therefore, when Christ returns, the dead are raised and death is completely destroyed because all of the consequences of the curse have been undone when Jesus bears the curse upon the cross. This becomes clear in the following verses (vv. 27-28): *"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. 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."*

The opening words of verse 27, refer to the Father, who is said to put all things under the feet of the Son. This clearly echoes the words of Psalm 8:6: *"You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."* Jesus Christ has been given that dominion that God originally gave to Adam—only in this post-resurrection context of Christ's victory over death and the reversal of the curse, Christ's dominion is much more far-reaching, and entails the same kind of universal dominion that Adam would have been given had he obeyed the covenant of works, and been confirmed in righteousness (and thereby glorified).⁵ Since Adam disobeyed, Jesus must obey.

By virtue of his bodily resurrection, Jesus Christ has been given dominion over all things (except over the Father). The aorist tense, *"he has put"* points to a single act of subjection, but the perfect tense (*has been put under his feet*) indicates a continuing state—all things remain in subjection to Christ. One act of the Father, (Christ being placed over all things) has on-going importance. All things are (and remain) under

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 212. Cf. Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 60 ff.

the authority of Christ, awaiting the second coming.⁶ According to verse 28, the climax, then, of human history is secured when Jesus Christ willingly subjects himself to the Father, so that God's Lordship over all creation is complete. When Jesus Christ, who has placed all things under his feet, in turn gives all things to the father, history has run its course and the consummation (the end of all things) is at hand.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

Paul's map of redemptive history can be summarized as follows. First comes the fall (v. 21-22). *"For as by a man [Adam] came death, by a man [Jesus] has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die [the Fall when Adam acts as the representative of the human race], so also in Christ shall all be made alive [those who are represented by Christ—the elect].* In verses 23-24, Paul now gives us his big picture map. *"But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits [Christ, and those raised in him—the already], then at his coming those who belong to Christ [the bodily resurrection of those already raised and seated with Christ]. Then comes the end [that is, when Christ returns], when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power [this is the final consummation, the end of history].* What happens between Christ's resurrection and the general resurrection at the end of the age is spelled out in verses 25-26. *"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" [which indeed Jesus destroys when he returns].* Finally, in verses 27-28, Paul then spells out what it means for history to reach the final consummation. *"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. 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."*

The problem for those who are premillennial (the vast majority of evangelical Christians) is that if Paul taught that there was a one thousand-year interval between Christ's second coming and the final judgment, then "it seems unthinkable that Paul, if he believed in such a kingdom, should pass over it without a word."⁷ There is no indication whatsoever of any delay of a thousand years between Christ's second coming and the final judgment. Paul's point is that the end comes *immediately* at the time of Christ's appearing when the dead are raised. Jesus Christ's second coming is accompanied by the "resurrection of Christians and ushers in the end, at which the main event is the handing over of the kingdom by Christ to God."⁸ When Jesus returns, this is the consummation, the day of judgment, resurrection and the new creation. This is the final and glorious outcome of redemptive history.

But even as we eagerly await that glorious day when our Lord returns, Paul reminds us, "for he must reign" over all things. Jesus is even now directing the affairs of men and nations so that human history will one day come to its final destination—the salvation of God's people. Although we look ahead as we wait for that day, because Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of a great harvest, even now we are already seen as seated and raised with Christ. And because Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, so too, we shall be raised from the dead. And this is the basis of Christian hope.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 212.

⁷ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 356. See Geerhardus Vos' discussion in; The Pauline Eschatology, 236-246.

⁸ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 356.