

**THE ASSURANCE IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION**  
**1 Corinthians 15:20-28**  
**June 25, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

We have been looking at the doctrine of the resurrection over the past few weeks in 1 Corinthians 15. We have seen the *certainty* of Christ's resurrection in vv. 1-11 and the *hope* in Christ's resurrection in vv. 12-19. As we noted in each of those sermons, the resurrection is often excluded from our gospel presentation. Please do not misunderstand me – our focus in sharing the gospel should be the Cross and forgiveness of sins. Man's redemption is in the shed blood of Christ alone. But as we saw in 15:4, the resurrection was part of the gospel that was of "first importance" for Paul and in 15:17 Paul ties the resurrection to forgiveness of sins as well. So we see the importance of the resurrection to the gospel in this chapter.

Needless to say, the importance of the resurrection has been much on my mind over the past month in preparing these sermons. I have paid particular attention to my gospel presentation and listened intently to others share the gospel. If I am reading a book that is focusing on the gospel, I look for the resurrection. In Mexico last week, our intent was to share the gospel with adults and children. We told bible stories in VBS, played soccer in near 100° weather with dust blowing everywhere, we offered medical and dental help to those that desperately needed it, we watched as women sewed on six sewing machines that we provided for them, all with the hope of sharing the gospel. I would suggest that many of those we were with last week have never heard about the resurrection of Christ, much less the resurrection of the saints.

The situation at Corinth was different. They were not ignorant of the resurrection. Some in their midst had seen the risen Lord. And while they did not deny the resurrection of Christ, some denied the future resurrection of the believer. Paul's point in this passage is that *Christ has been raised therefore believers can have the assurance that they too will live.*

**I. The Union in the Resurrection (15:20-23)**

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthian believers of their identity with Christ. The denial of the future resurrection of the saints, as Paul has already shown, was logically impossible. In these verses he illustrates that impossibility in theological terms.

**1. The principle of first fruits (v. 20)**

**"But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep."** Paul again asserts the fact of Christ's resurrection. As we saw in v. 4, Paul showed this truth biblically, "He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Here he restates that truth and sets out to show the theological implication of Christ's resurrection. He begins by using an agricultural analogy from the Old Testament that these at Corinth would easily recognize.

Those of you who were with me in Mexico last week might have noticed the crops of sugar cane that seemed to go on for miles. What you might not have noticed is that in many of these fields, a portion of the sugar cane had been harvested while part of the field remained. This is because the crops are planted in stages. A part of the field is sown before the rest to see if the plant will grow. Once the plants sprout, the remainder of the crop is planted. This is their way of testing the soil and assuring them that the rest of the crop would grow as well. The first fruits offer an assurance, if all conditions remained the same, that the whole harvest was soon to follow. The entire harvest depended on these first samplings.

This is similar to what Paul is showing these at Corinth. In the Mosaic calendar the first fruits were the very first portions of the harvest and were to be set apart as offerings to God. The day following the Sabbath after the Passover was set aside for this offering (Lev. 23:15-17; Deut. 26:1-11). This day happens to coincide with the exact day that Christ arose from the dead. Do you see how all of this fits together according to God's decrees? This Old Testament offering of the first fruits was a picture that pointed to the day of Christ's offering Himself once for all and His subsequent resurrection. Paul's analogy signifies that Christ's resurrection, as **"the first fruits,"** was the beginning of something much larger: the full harvest of all believers **"who are asleep."** As we have seen, **"asleep"** designates those who have died in Christ and would one day be awakened, or resurrected, at His return. So the principle of the first fruits of Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of an even greater harvest, the resurrection of the saints.

Paul then solidifies this truth by referring to the representative headship of Adam and Christ in God's dealings with the human race.

## 2. A parallel between Adam and Christ (vv. 21-22)

**"For since by a man came death."** Adam was no ordinary man. He was created as the representative head of the entire human race. He was created in the image of God and given the divine mandate to oversee God's creation. As our representative, everything that Adam did counted for all of us. The 1689 Confession states it this way, "The family of man is rooted in the first human pair" [6.2]. We know from Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit and the consequence of their sin was death, physical and spiritual, to all their posterity. Paul asserts this truth in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." So the result of Adam's sin is that all men are born sinners and inherit the guilt of and penalty for sin. The Confession states, "Their sin (that being Adam and Eve's) involved us all, and by it death appertained to all. All men became dead in sin, and totally polluted in all parts and faculties of both soul and body" [6.2]. So Paul asserts the truth for all mankind, **"For since by a man came death... For as in Adam all die."**

But Paul, and more importantly God, does not stop at man's death for sin, **"By a man also came the resurrection of the dead."** Since death came through one man, Adam, it should not surprise us that according to God's plan of redemption, life also comes through one man, the second Adam, Jesus Christ. There are numerous passages that deal with the truth that Christ's experience on earth was much more than His alone. What happened to Him in His death and resurrection happens to all who believe in Him.

**Romans 6:3-11** – Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, <sup>6</sup> knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; <sup>7</sup> for he who has died is freed from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, <sup>9</sup> knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. <sup>10</sup> For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. <sup>11</sup> Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Further, Paul writes, **“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”** The little phrase, **“in Christ,”** is a central theme of Paul's teaching on the relationship between Christ and the believer. It represents our union with Christ, a union that can never be broken. Because believers are united to Christ, God accounts Christ's merits to them. Just as in Adam *all* died, in Christ *all* will be made alive. We must be careful that we do not go beyond what Scripture teaches. By **“all”** Paul does not mean that all will be saved. **“All”** is not a numerical identity, but a functional or causal relation. In other words, the two *alls* are not equal. As Leon Morris points out, **“But the *all* who are in Adam are not identical to the *all* who are in Christ... This verse gives no countenance to universalism. Paul is saying that in Adam all that are to die, die, while in Christ all who are to live, live”** [*I Corinthians*, 210].

The theological implications here are plain. By denying the future resurrection of the believer, these Corinthians were striking a blow to the entire plan of redemption, that of being **“in Christ.”** If the believer is not resurrected, then the body of Christ would be torn apart and the believer would be separated from Christ. For Paul, this was a spiritual absurdity. He wrote in Romans 8:38-39, **“For I am convinced that neither *death*, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, *which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”** So we see that the believer's assurance of a future bodily resurrection is rooted in and secure in the resurrection of Christ.

### **3. The order of the resurrection (v. 23)**

Paul specifies that there is a definite order to the resurrection, **“But each in his own order.”** The word in the Greek is *tagma*, which means “turn.” It was originally used as a military term for a company of soldiers. Paul uses the term here more generally to designate two divisions of those who experience a resurrection.

The first division is Christ Himself, **“Christ the first fruits.”** This event has already taken place when Christ was resurrected three days after His death. He is the first fruit of those raised from the dead. This designates that He was the first to arise. Some argue the raisings of Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus to dispute Paul's assertion that Christ was the first to be resurrected. However, as has been noted by many, those raisings were really resuscitations, not resurrections, because they both died again. Christ's resurrection was a true resurrection because He lives and will live forevermore. Paul states this truth in Colossians 1:18, **“He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, *the firstborn from the dead*, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.”**

The second division Paul refers to as **“those who are Christ's at His coming,”** in other words, His people from the beginning of creation. These represent all who have come to faith in Christ through the ages. All who are in Christ, who **“are Christ's,”** will be resurrected **“at His coming.”** This refers to the resurrection of the saints at the Lord's second coming. The dispensationalist typically launches into a detailed account of a special order to the resurrection of the saints based on texts that they presume teach such things. They refer to a resurrection of the church, which is defined as all those who have come to faith in Christ from Pentecost to the rapture of the church. Next will be the resurrection of the Tribulation saints, followed by the resurrection of the Old Testament saints, followed by a resurrection of those who come to faith during the millennial kingdom, followed by a resurrection of the unrighteous (see John MacArthur, *I Corinthians*, 418).

Now I am not trying to poke fun at one's eschatological leanings. There are some fine scholars and preachers that I greatly respect that come from a dispensational background. But I thoroughly disagree with them on these things. While there will be a resurrection of the unrighteous, that is not Paul's concern in this text. He is dealing with the resurrection of Christ and of the believer in the entirety of chapter 15. Paul does not here teach that there will be these different stages in the resurrection of believers that I would consider to be significant if true. He simply says, **"those who are Christ's at His coming."** Now of course the dispensationalist can make this fit his scheme. But that would be to divert from Paul's argument in this text that *all* who are in Christ will live, and *all* of them will be resurrected when Christ returns. Paul says that *all* believers will be raised in a single event, not three or four stages as the dispensationalist asserts. Paul teaches the simple truth that Christ has risen and His resurrection is a guarantee of a future bodily resurrection of all the saints when He comes again. The believer's union with Christ dictates this truth. As one writer put it, "The first fruits having already been delivered, it was impossible that the harvest should not be realized in full" [Richard Pratt, *1 Corinthians*, 445].

## II. The Triumph of the Resurrection (15:24-28)

Paul then launches into some wonderful truths concerning our risen Lord. His resurrection guarantees not only our future resurrection but some important aspects of His life as well.

### 1. A promise of His return (v. 24)

Paul is very plain – the end will come. We do not know, in fact, according to Scripture we cannot know, when this will occur (Mt. 24:36). But Scriptures plainly teach here and elsewhere that the resurrected Christ will return and gather home His saints, and **"then comes the end."** **"The end"** will be a time for judgment and the restoration of all things in the new creation. It marks the conclusion of Christ's redemptive work for His people. Paul says two things will mark this time.

First, Christ will abolish **"all rule and all authority and power."** The word order in the Greek has this event at the end of v. 24, but the meaning of the text shows that this precedes His handing over the kingdom to the Father. The change in the Greek tense allows for this, **"when He has abolished."** When Christ returns, **"all rule and all authority and power"** will be **"abolished."** **"Abolished"** or "destroyed" (KJV) means "to render inoperable" or "to render null and void." Paul does not speak of some hand-to-hand combat that will occur when Christ returns. His reign and rule are already established at His return. All rule other than that of Christ will be **"abolished."** At this time, "every knee will bow, whether of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,"<sup>11</sup> and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11).

After this, Paul says, Christ hands the kingdom over to the Father. The Father entrusted the kingdom to His Son in the period lasting from His first coming to His second coming. In Matthew 28:18 we read where Christ proclaimed this enthronement, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." The resurrected Christ works today to accomplish the perfect purposes of the Father. So Paul asserts that at the time of the Lord's return, when He gathers together the saints from all ages, the end will come. He will destroy everything that is hostile to God and hand the kingdom over to the Father. Some think that this kingdom is future. However, Scripture plainly teaches that the kingdom refers to the rule and reign of Christ in the

world and in the hearts of all who trust Him. This is what Christ hands over to the Father. This will be the climax of redemptive history. I like how Benjamin Warfield put it, "The period between the two advents is the period of Christ's kingdom, and when He comes again it is not to institute His kingdom, but to lay it down" [B. B. Warfield, quoted by Geoffrey Wilson, *1 Corinthians*, 223].

## 2. A divine necessity (v. 25)

Paul writes, "**For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.**" Christ's rule and reign are His working to restore the creation, to take back what is rightfully His as Creator. He is taking back what Satan tried to steal in the Garden.

Psalm 110 is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. Verse 25 recollects Psalm 110:1, "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet." Originally, this Psalm spoke of the promise of victory given to the descendants of David. Every time a Davidic king experienced victory over an enemy, he saw this promise realized. Paul here applies this Psalm to Christ, who is the final son of David to sit on David's throne. Those at Christ's triumphal entry recognized this Messianic truth when they shouted, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:10). In Christ, all the promises to David and His dynasty are fulfilled. We read in Paul's writings that Christ ascended to the throne of David at the time of His ascension.

**Ephesians 1:19-23** – *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might <sup>20</sup> which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

**Colossians 3:1** – Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

In Psalm 89 God promised that David's family would rule over the entire earth, and this promise has been fulfilled in Christ. This is why it is necessary that Christ "**must reign,**" because the Father decreed it would be so.

## 3. Victory over death (vv. 26-27a)

The last enemy to be defeated is death itself. Adam introduced death into the human race at the Fall, but Christ has come to eliminate death. This is a great assurance for the believer. The writer of Hebrews refers to this wonderful victory in Hebrews 2:14-15, "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives." Revelation 20:6 also refers to this victory over death, "Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power." And Christ Himself offers words of encouragement to Martha at the raising of Lazarus in John 11:24-26, "Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.'"

So the last enemy that will be abolished is death. I like what Curtis Vaughan said concerning this promise. "Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, but the process of destruction was begun with the Resurrection of Christ. With His Resurrection the decisive battle was won and ultimate victory was assured. All that remains is the 'mopping up' work" [*1 Corinthians*, 156]. It is during this "mopping up" that all things are put in subjection under His feet. In v. 27 Paul quotes Psalm 8:6, "**For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET.**" "**All things**" means all things. Every government, every ruler, including Satan, every person, and even death is subject to Christ, who at His death inaugurated His kingdom over which no one can rule but Him. We might not understand how Christ is on the throne with all of the evil and wickedness and perverseness we see in our world. Men have struggled with this since the Fall. Job asked, "Why do the wicked *still* live, continue on, also become very powerful?" (Job 21:7). Jeremiah asked, "Why has the way of the wicked prospered?" (Jer. 12:1). Habakkuk asked, "Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?" (Hab. 1:13). We too might struggle at times to see Christ on the throne. But make no mistake about it – He is on throne! Nothing or no one, not even death, can usurp His authority because the battle was decided at the Cross, His resurrection reign verifies it, and His return will finalize it. In the meantime, He is just "mopping up."

#### 4. A notable exception (vv. 27b-28)

Paul concludes this section with a reference to the Son's relationship to the Father. "**But when He says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him.**"<sup>28</sup> **When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.**"

God the Father has given everything to His Son through whom He created the universe and all that is in it. "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (Jn. 1:3). "For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him."<sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16-17). "In these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Heb. 1:2).

The mystery of the Godhead is in full view for us to see in this magnificent relationship between the Father and the Son. The uncreated God and Father of all creation who commissioned His Son to form the universe has subjected all things to Him with one exception, Himself. Not only will the Father not be subject to the Son, but in v. 28 Paul says that when the work of redemption is complete, the Son will be subjected to the Father. Some see an inferiority structure in the Trinity in this passage. But I think Leon Morris correctly relieves this tension, "We must bear in mind that Paul is not speaking of the essential nature of either the Son or the Father. He is speaking of the work that Christ has accomplished and will accomplish" [*1 Corinthians*, 213].

This work Christ is accomplishing today. He reigns as a mediator who intercedes for His people (Rom. 8:34) and is preparing a place for them (Jn. 14:3). When all things are finally subject to Christ, when the work of redemption is complete, the Son delivers the kingdom to God the Father, "**so that God may be all in all.**" It is all for His glory and that His name might be praised for all eternity! That is the ultimate triumph of the resurrection. And if God has decreed

these things, then we can have this assurance, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also” (Jn. 14:3).

### **Conclusion**

John Piper draws three reasons why the Father subjected all things to Christ. “First, that the Son use his authority to redeem a people for himself from every tribe and tongue and nation. Second, that he defeat the enemies of God. And finally, that he draw all attention - all glory - back to the Father” [[www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/88/040388.html](http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/88/040388.html)].

We read the text of Jesus’ dialogue with Martha concerning the resurrection at the raising of Lazarus. I close with the question he asked Martha, “*Do you believe this?*” Do you believe that He is the resurrection and the life, and all who believe in Him will never die?

If you have never trusted Christ this morning, then the words “**then comes the end**” should strike horror in your soul.