

*1 Corinthians 15:20-22***PREFACE**

At times when one is studying Scripture, one can be overwhelmed by the *wonder* of it all. This week I once again experienced that sensation—not just from the truth recorded in our target verses, but from how that miraculous, mind-boggling truth is woven throughout passages written by different authors; in this instance, Paul, Matthew, Jesus, John, and Luke. Of course, just as there are practical, scientific explanations for the glorious sunset that to the sensitive heart speaks of God, we know that, in truth, there was only *one* author of God’s word: the Holy Spirit. But that fact removes none of the wonder and glory of how the continuity of Scripture is woven so intricately, from beginning to end, with the power to take one’s breath away.

One challenge presented in these situations, when one is slammed back against the wall by the sheer weight of what God’s word is saying, is working out how in the world to express that same wonder to others. When all one wants to do is lean back and meditate on the supernatural genius of God’s economy for the salvation of man, it can be a challenge to focus that down into a thirty-minute session.

In our last session the apostle Paul detailed the resulting consequences if the resurrection of the dead is *not* true. Now, from v20 to v28, he argues the resulting consequences since the resurrection of the dead *is* true—specifically the resurrection of those in Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

In his commentary on First Corinthians, John MacArthur quotes theologian Erich Sauer:

The present age is Easter time. It begins with the resurrection of the Redeemer and ends with the resurrection of the redeemed. Between lies the spiritual resurrection of those called into life through Christ. So we live between the two Easters, and in the power of the first Easter we go to meet the last Easter.

Sauer’s “last Easter” refers to the bodily resurrection of those who are saved in Christ at what we call the Rapture, when Christ returns for His church before all hell breaks out on earth. God’s word refers to this as the “first resurrection”; the second resurrection—that of the unsaved—will take place after the Millennium, just before the Great White Throne of judgment. Jesus spoke of both in the gospel of John.

Read John 5:25-29.

Everyone gets a resurrected body—*everyone*: the redeemed get one fit for the purity of eternal life with God; the unredeemed get one fit to endure an eternity in the lake of fire ([Revelation 20:15](#))—neither of which would occur if Jesus had not been raised first. The passage before focuses on the former, the *first* resurrection. And because we cannot hope to include in one thirty-minute session the entirety of Paul’s thesis—which he takes the rest of this chapter to set forth—we must digest it in small bites, while reserving for the future the pleasant state of being satiated to the full.

v20

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

After his eight-verse journey into the “what-if” of *no* resurrection, Paul opens the flip-side argument with a thunderous, “But now Christ *has* been raised from the dead...” (emphasis added). And he will now systematically establish the evidence for his thesis, which is, as Gordon Fee puts it, “Christ’s resurrection *demands* our resurrection; otherwise death is never defeated and God cannot be ‘all in all’ [v28].” Believers *must* be raised from the dead, otherwise what’s the point of it all? Christ’s bodily resurrection to a new body and form is what makes our resurrection possible. And for this Paul terms Him the “first fruits of those who are asleep.”

It is true that the concept of “first fruits” has a rich heritage in the OT, referring to bringing the first and best of the year’s crop (or womb) to the temple for it to be dedicated to the Lord.

Sidebar: In this it is much like the concept of a “tithe.” We do not tithe from what is left over after all the bills have been paid. No, we tithe right off the top, before everything else. Thus rendering absurd the excuse, “We can’t afford to tithe.” God is due the *first* of our fruits—not what is left over.

That is not how Paul uses “first fruits” here, however. Here that term is used by the apostle to refer to a down payment or earnest money—a pledge that something more will occur.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:5.

(pledge, guarantee, earnest, down payment = *arrabon* = part of the purchase-money or property given in advance as security for the rest)

Just as with the pledge of the Holy Spirit, given to every believer, God raised Christ from the dead as a guarantee—a pledge—that He will do the same for us. “As the first fruits, Christ’s resurrection is a pledge of the full harvest of resurrection to come” (Garland).

As we discussed in v6, “those who are asleep” is more than just a polite euphemism for death. We say someone has “passed away,” which sounds better than saying they died. Saying someone has “fallen asleep” is sort of like that, but Thiselton writes that the idea of sleep “carries with it the expectation of awaking to a new dawn in a new day.” For believers death is little more than a period of waiting; as Fee writes, “Not all who have died are raised to life in Christ, but only those who have fallen asleep in Him.”

v21-22

For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

Verses 21 and 22 present a double parallelism. Here Paul emphasizes the literal humanness of the God/Man, Christ Jesus. There are some that say that Jesus, as the Son of God, could not *really* die, that His was a different sort of “death” because He was divine. But here Paul says no, Christ’s death was the death of a man—*anthropos*, a human being, mankind—and His resurrection was the resurrection of a man (Garland).

The NKJV retains the slightly more poetic “by man” of the KJV, rather than “by a man” used by our other common versions. The Greek is singular masculine, so not only is “a man” a more precise translation, but it removes the possibility of the reader misinterpreting the verse to mean, *Death came out of mankind, as did the resurrection of the dead*. That’s *not* what is being said here. Of course, v22 also removes that possible interpretation.

Verse 22 also clarifies something else. While both death and believer resurrection came through “a man,” the first is by means of lineage, by inherited depravity, but the second is by means of justification by faith in Christ. In a sense, both are by faith, or trust; a rejection of Christ is the same as leaving one’s trust in one’s corporate head: Adam. When modern men and women place their trust in themselves, or in the philosophies of a fallen race, they are, in essence, placing their trust in their father Adam. *That* faith means death, while trust in Christ means life.

Note: Don’t confuse “all die” with the fact that all flesh eventually perishes. Verse 22, especially, is eschatological. In an earthly, human sense all flesh eventually ends up either in a grave or destroyed, but if one never leaves the posterity of Adam, one will *eternally* die. The timeline is dramatic and tragic: those in Adam will indeed be resurrected, but they are immediately judged, condemned, and thrown into the eternal lake of fire; they will be resurrected—the biblical *second* resurrection—only to a cognizant, tortuous, eternal death. They “all die.” But those who are “in Christ” will be resurrected to a cognizant, joyful, eternal life. They “will be made alive.”

This is why, although all our versions translate v22, “...in Christ all will be made alive,” at great risk of being zapped, I would suggest (and most commentators agree) that this is to be understood as if the word order were slightly changed to *all in Christ will be made alive*, or, *for those in Christ, all will be made alive*. For Paul, in that phrase, is speaking only of the resurrection of *believing* dead.

Garland: The analogy assumes human solidarity with those at the beginning of a line who then become representatives of those who follow. Adam leads the way and represents the old order; Christ leads the way and represents the new order. Paul assumes that the representative determines the fate of the group. All those bound to Adam share his banishment from Eden, his alienation, and his fate of death so that death becomes the common lot of his posterity. All those bound to Christ receive reconciliation and will share His resurrection and heavenly blessings.

By the way, the concept of “in Adam all die” is not unique to Paul, nor is it unique to the NT. We find it even in the extra-biblical texts of the OT Apocrypha.

I answered then and said, this is my first and last saying, that it had been better that the earth had not given you Adam: or else, when it had given him, to have restrained him from sinning. For what profit is it for all that are in this present time to live in heaviness, and after death to look for punishment? O you Adam, what have you done? For though it was you that sinned, the evil is not fallen on you alone, but upon all of us that come of you. For what profit is it to us, if there be promised us an immortal time, whereas we have done the works that bring death? (2 Esdras 7:116-119)

CONCLUSION

The biblical concept of sonship is less about blood than behavior. By our behavior and appearance we are identified with our father or mother. We are born into this world the sons and daughters of our *corporate* head, Adam. Unless we are “born again” (John 3:7), we will continue to behave and look like Adam—to a bad end. Born again in Christ, however, we lose our sonship in Adam; we throw off the restraints of his sin, and live in a new hope of life and light. We are remade in the likeness of our new Father and new Lord, and anticipate with joy the moment when—even after physical death—we are “made alive” for all eternity.