

## PREFACE

Our God is a God of order, and that fact, which is established throughout His word—but especially in the OT—always reminds me of the precise order Yahweh dictated for the layout of Israel’s camp whenever their exodus came to a halt, along with the order in which each tribe would pack up to continue the march. We find it in Numbers 2; let me read an abridged version of that chapter.

**The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side. Those to camp on the east side toward the sunrise shall be of the standard of the camp of Judah by their companies... Those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar... All those listed of the camp of Judah, by their companies, were 186,400. They shall set out first on the march. On the south side shall be the standard of the camp of Reuben by their companies... All those listed of the camp of Reuben, by their companies, were 151,450. They shall set out second. Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard. On the west side shall be the standard of the camp of Ephraim by their companies...” [etc.] Thus did the people of Israel. According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they set out, each one in his clan, according to his fathers’ house. (from Numbers 2:1-34 ESV)**

God never changes who He is. He remains a God of order, and no less regarding His intricate plan—already set in motion—for the redemption of His elect, and their subsequent resurrection at the beginning of (as Paul puts it in our passage) “the end.”

In our previous session on vv20-22 I made the following statement about Paul’s use of the “first fruits” imagery—especially whether he was employing this in line with the idea of the first and best of a year’s harvest. Here is what I said:

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

Now I’d like to take some of the sharp edge off that statement. From vv23-24 we can deduce that Paul is using that imagery in *both* ways, as W. Harold Mare points out.

*Mare:* By “first fruits” Paul brings to bear the rich imagery of the OT. The “first fruits”—the first sheaf of the harvest offered to the Lord ([Leviticus 23](#))—was not only prior to the main harvest but was also an assurance that the rest of the harvest was coming. So with Christ. He preceded His people in His bodily resurrection and He is also the guarantee of their resurrection at His second coming.

## Read 1 Corinthians 15:23-26.

v23

*But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming,*

In vv21-22 Paul emphasized the *promise* of Christ's resurrection, that everyone "in Christ" is promised their own resurrection at His coming. Now Paul emphasizes the necessary *order* in which the resurrections must take place.

*But each in his own order...*

This phrase adds a slightly different nuance to the imagery. Taken from the military, *tagmati*, translated "order," refers to ranking or class, or the organization of companies, or units, and is not far afield from the passage about the arrangement of Israel's camp in the book of Numbers. Every group (and every rank within that group) has their designated place and order of movement.

On the U.S.S. *Chicago*, deployed in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam war, there were deckhands, engineers, the black gang, clerks, officers and enlisted men—and a motley group of guys who were the flag band; each group on the ship, and each individual in that group, were assigned both a *battle station* or *general quarters* and an *abandon ship* post. Being of vital importance to the security of the ship if attacked, the band's general quarters were in the ship's library, buried deep (and out of the way) in the bowels of the ship.

Unfortunately the band was never assigned an abandon ship post; apparently the powers that be did not deem us worth saving, but would have us go down with the ship, all the while playing "Abide With Me," as did the ship's band on the *Titanic*. That's a pretty accurate picture of what they thought of the band on that ship. Nevertheless, everyone on that ship had their assigned order; the officers at the top, the enlisted men further down. Every group had their assigned work and stations—ours just happened to be in the ship's library.

*...Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming,*

This is God's order. We, the various members of the family, cannot be raised before our Head, Christ Jesus. He not only set the pattern, but He paved the way. Christ is the one—the *only* one—who has conquered death. Death must be conquered before there can be a resurrection. *His* resurrection makes it possible for the rest of the "troops" to follow our Captain out of the grave when He returns for us (*parousia*). Verse 23 harmonizes well with Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church.

## Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

*then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.*

As in earlier passages, we should not let ourselves be sidetracked into an examination of the end-times sequence. That is not Paul's purpose here; that's not his agenda. His purpose is to demonstrate the surety and importance of believer resurrection because of Christ's prior resurrection. Many have tried to read too much into this passage, sensing, somehow, a third resurrection in "then the end," inventing a new meaning for "end" as "the rest"—i.e., the resurrection of the rest, the resurrection of the unredeemed—the unsaved. This is not a passage to be used to work out a detailed analysis of the *eschaton* (last things); the apostle has his mind and focus on *resurrection*, not a road map for the *eschaton*.

One indication of this is Paul's choice of *hotan*, translated "when"—used twice in this verse: "when He hands over the kingdom... when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power." The word is decidedly vague; it could be translated "whenever," or even "while." It denotes something that occurs at some indefinite point in the future. Paul is perfectly capable of being more specific about order and timing, but he doesn't do that here. Likewise, Paul does not address here the resurrection of the unjust, the unregenerate. He is not denying that it will occur; it is just not part of his present concern: the relationship between Christ's resurrection and that of His followers. We can deduce from this passage only that once the church is raised at Christ's *parousia*, "then the end" (the Greek has no verb). It is not clear what the apostle means by "the end" (*to telos*).

It can mean the ultimate "end" to something—no more, fine. Fee points out that the moment described here—the return of Christ with its accompanying resurrection of the dead in Christ and the airlift of those still alive—will indeed mark "the end of history as we now know it." Anyone left behind will surely realize that he has just witnessed an epochal, cataclysmic moment; whatever follows, he will know that nothing will ever be what it was before.

However, *telos* can also mean that something has been *completed*, which may be the better way to read this. For those in Christ, the coming of Christ will signal the completion of His plan and the end of their battle against the flesh. What up to this point has been academic—on the left side of the "now—not yet"—will now be actual reality. God's word has been telling us that Christ has conquered death (e.g., 2 Timothy 1:10), but we still see our loved ones dying. Christ's return, and the church bodily removed from the earth will mark the completion of man's history and the dawning of a new epoch. From this point on, God and His Christ will be calling all the shots. No one can ever again say, "There is no God." And Paul highlights two things that will confirm this.

*when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father,  
when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.*

These two clauses are presented in logical *reverse* order, which makes the NIVs and ESV, if not the most *literal* translations, the more helpful rendering of this verse.

**Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father *after*  
destroying every rule and every authority and power. (ESV; emphasis added)**

That is, Christ cannot hand over the kingdom to the Father until He (Christ) has abolished all rule and all authority and power, for nothing impure can be permitted in His presence.

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I want to close this session at this point, for when one digs into the fullness of this text in v24—especially these last two clauses—it is simply too breathtaking, too deep, too glorious to be reduced down to a paragraph or two at the end of a session, when everyone’s stomachs are growling for their Sunday pot roast.

Next time we will dwell fully on v24, giving it its due; there is so much here, that is so profound. We will dig into it in depth, and then proceed to v26.