

From The Pulpit Of



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The Big Picture

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Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

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Text

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

Introduction

1 Corinthians 15 – What a perfect place to be (in God’s providence) as we gear up for Easter this year. It’s all about the gospel, which hinges on the resurrection of Jesus.

In vv. 1-7 we saw the character and the content of the gospel. The character – it must be preached, it must be received, and it must be received all throughout the Christian life. The content of the gospel – Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures, was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Well then in vv. 8-11 we saw that this historical fact has immense personal impact. The gospel reality gave Paul a new self-assessment, a new status, and a new seeking. And it can do the same for you.

Last week Paul invited us to ask, “What if?” What if the resurrection didn’t actually happen? What would that mean? I’m sorry for the depressing sermon last week, but if you haven’t ever really thought about it, you need to.

But today’s sermon is back to the positive side. Paul writes with a joyful certainty – “But in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead!” It’s not all futile! It’s not all a fake. Paul assures the Corinthians and us that Christ indeed came back to life. He appeared to all these people who say they saw him. And Paul, who had every reason to not want it to be true, says he saw him. And he’s giving his life to make sure everyone knows it’s real, it’s really real!

Have you gotten to know this guy – Paul? Have you read his writings carefully (we have 13 of his letters)? Have you heard his story as Luke tells it (in the book of Acts)? Have you heard what other people said about him (like Peter; 2Pe. 3:15ff)? Does he seem like a lunatic? Does he seem like the kind of guy that is trying to trick

everyone? I feel like I know Paul really well and he seems eminently sane and trustworthy to me.

Do you remember in the kids' book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Lucy gets into the magical world of Narnia and nobody believes her? And then later her sometimes nasty older brother Edmund gets in to this other dimension too. She thinks that now everyone will know she was telling the truth. But Edmund denies it, tries to paint Lucy as someone who can't distinguish between pretend and reality. Their older siblings – Peter and Susan – go to the see the Professor who owns the house they are staying in, expecting him to reassure them that such a story just couldn't be true. The professor asked, “[D]oes your experience lead you to regard your brother or your sister as the more reliable?...”

“That’s just the funny thing about it, sir,’ said Peter. ‘Up till now, I’d have said Lucy every time.’

“And what do you think, my dear?’ said the Professor, turning to Susan.

“Well,’ said Susan, ‘in general, I’d say the same as Peter, but this couldn’t be true....’

“That is more than I know,’ said the Professor, ‘and a charge of lying against someone whom you have always found truthful is a very serious thing; a very serious thing indeed.’

“We were afraid it mightn’t even be lying,’ said Susan; ‘we thought there might be something wrong with Lucy.’

“Madness, you mean?’ said the Professor quite coolly. ‘Oh, you can make your minds easy about that. One has only to look at her and talk to her to see that she is not mad.’...

“Logic!’ said the Professor half to himself. ‘Why don’t they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn’t tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.’”¹

The fictional detective Sherlock Holmes said something similar about how once you eliminate all the other options, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. At first glance a story about a man back from the dead sounds ridiculous. But when you really look into it’s actually a quite credible claim. “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead!”

And consider this: we’re not just talking about a distant historical event, but a continuing present reality. “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 ongoing condition.”² Not just “was” but “has been.” The perfect tense “speak[s] of an event accomplished in the past... with results existing ... in the present.”³ We’re not *just* trying to ascertain something that happened 2,000 years ago, but it’s also a claim that Jesus is currently still alive and active by his Spirit in the affairs of the world today – changing individual’s lives, sustaining a personal relationship with his people, building his church. How many of you can testify to having genuine, regular encounters with the living Lord Jesus still today?

Jesus died, but he did not stay dead. He came back to life. And not just a temporary resuscitation, but a death-defeating resurrection never to die again. And so he

is still alive as we speak, with us right now, working out a Master Plan. And that big picture is what we're looking at today. In short, what we're going to see from 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 is just this: **with the resurrection of Jesus something big has begun.**

We will take this passage under three big headings that paint the big picture: firstfruits, federal headship, and the grand finale.

But first, let's pray...

Firstfruits

The first major concept we come to after the insistence on the fact of Christ's resurrection is this analogy of firstfruits. "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." What does that mean – *firstfruits*?

Remember: Christ is not Jesus' last name, but a title, a title that situates him in a long story. To call Jesus the Christ is to say that he fulfills centuries of hopes found in the OT Scriptures. He fulfills direct prophecies and indirect anticipations. God gave the nation of Israel all kinds of different institutions and ceremonies that point to Christ. For example, there were seven annual feasts that regulated time for God's people. We've already seen Paul say that Jesus fulfilled the idea of the Passover Lamb (5:7). Well there was another yearly practice laid out in Leviticus 23:10-12. It was called the Feast of Firstfruits. Jesus is the fulfillment of this feast too.

Here's how it worked: in the springtime the first crop to be harvested was the barley. And God said that the first barley sheaf that you get you were supposed to give to the Lord as an offering. It was a way of acknowledging that God was going to provide way more in the rest of the barley harvest and in the remaining crops to come throughout the year. It's kind of like some businesses that frame their first dollar bill they ever made on the wall in anticipation that more was to come. It would be like cutting off the first crocus or daffodil that pokes its head above the soil in Chicago this spring and bringing it to the church as a way of demonstrating your faith in God that a whole spread of bright-colored flowers are coming.

Jesus' resurrected body is that first glorious flower that has popped up. And there will be more! "The harvest will be huge."⁴ Other places in the NT he is called the firstborn from among the dead (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). He's the forerunner. Richard Gaffin writes – "Our Lord's "resurrection is the representative beginning of the resurrection of [all] believers."⁵ Another scholarly observer puts it this way – "Christ's resurrection is not an isolated event but guarantees something even more stupendous. [O]ur resurrection is not wholly separate from Christ's resurrection, but earlier and later parts of the same event, with the earlier part serving as a promise and guarantee of that which is yet to come."⁶ So **with the resurrection of Jesus, something big has begun.** It's the start of the resurrection of all believers. He's the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Don't you love that description – 'fallen asleep'? For the believer, death is just a little nap, with sweet dreams. Remember when Jesus said of the little girl who had died – "She's only sleeping." They all laughed at him, but he took her by the hand and said, "Little girl, time to get up." Like my dad would do on school mornings when I was a kid. "Nathan, time to get up." Jesus got up, permanently. He is the first one up, like the

parent in a Vrbo on vacation stirring in the kitchen, making waffles, the first of many who will soon be awake. Jesus' resurrection means that others will also be raised one day. He's the first, but not the last.

Federal Headship

But this notion of firstfruits is based on something even bigger – a concept that sorts out all of humanity into two camps and brings us all the way back to the beginning. It's an important theological category called Federal Headship. It's foundational to the Bible. 'Federal' comes from the Latin word meaning 'covenant'. So think of a Covenantal Representative. The Bible operates on the understanding that God makes covenants with humans. And in these covenants, one person can sign on behalf of many others that he is in some kind of legal relationship with. Just like how a congressman can represent our district in the legislature, or an attorney can come before a bench and make arguments for a plaintiff or defendant, or a basketball player can stand at the free throw line and shoot for a whole team when there's a flagrant foul. A federal head acts in the stead of his fellow people.

Maybe it will help to think of it like this – there's a giant rope and it's attached to one person at the front of a line. A bunch of other people are behind this one person and they are each bound to this rope. Now imagine that the lead person falls over a cliff into a bottomless pit. What would happen? Everyone bound to him by this rope would then get pulled over the edge. It's an unstoppable consequence, because they're all connected to the rope. Have you ever ridden The Raging Bull at Great America? Once that front car goes over the hump, there's no stopping the rest of the cars in tow from going over.

But imagine that someone else, someone not tied to the first rope, someone of unparalleled power goes down into the bottomless pit with an unbreakable rope tied to his waist and attaches it to a bunch of people down there. And he is able to rise up out of the abyss. You see him all of the sudden pop up on the other side of the chasm on solid ground. What do you expect to follow behind him?

This is really the big picture of all of humanity. Look at what Paul says starting in v. 21 – "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead." Who's he talking about? Next verse – "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Somehow these Corinthians had a concept of Adam at the fountainhead of the human race, perhaps from previous contact with Jews or it was something Paul or Priscilla and Aquilla or Peter or Apollos had taught them. It's foundational. All humanity is born bound to Adam, but he or she can be born again bound to Christ. There are two federal heads under which all humanity can be found. This schema makes sense of all humanity.

First, there was this man named Adam. He is an historical figure introduced to us in the second chapter of the Bible (Gen. 2). He was the first human being who God came to and made a covenant with. Adam would represent all humanity, present and future. If he kept the stipulations of the covenant – don't eat from a certain tree – he would gain immortal life for himself and all subsequent humanity in tow. But if he failed, he would be cut off from the tree of life and doomed to die. But not just himself but all who were bound in him. And we know from Genesis 3 that this is what happened. All humanity is now under God's judgment and destined to die, cut off from God and eternal life with him.

But there is another man, a second Adam – Christ. He is an historical figure. A true human, but also truly God. He perfectly kept all the law of God, resisted every temptation, earned an impeccable righteousness that deserved eternal life. But instead, he suffered death, death on a cross, he took the legal penalty, the full brunt of condemnation his people deserved. But then he came back to life – eternal life, unending, indestructible life! What will happen then to all those united to him by faith? Paul says that they too will enjoy eternal life.

Each of these two men’s actions have far reaching implications. Paul elaborates on this further in Romans 5. But even here in 1 Corinthians 15 we can see that the whole human race can be classified under one of these federal heads or the other. One commentary explains, “To be *in Adam* is to be part of the group which finds in Adam its representative and leader, which finds its identity and destiny in Adam and what he has brought about for his people. To be *in Christ* is to be part of the group which finds in Christ its representative and leader, which finds its identity and destiny in Christ and what he has brought about for his people.”⁷ Adam brings judicial death to all. Christ brings resurrection life to all.

Who is all? Is this teaching universalism – that everyone will be saved? No. Listen to the next verse – “But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.” How do you belong to Christ? By faith, by acknowledging your sins and that they deserve death, by believing that Christ bore the penalty for your sins on your behalf in his death, and by trusting that he will bring you with him into God’s welcoming presence which you have no right on your own to be in, both now and forevermore.

Grand Finale

So firstfruits, federal headship, and now the grand finale. This passage is giving us the big picture of the world, including its end. Verse 23 mentions Christ’s coming. The resurrected Christ has promised to come again. “The final event in human history is Jesus’ return to earth to bring an end to human existence as we now know it.”⁸ The same Jesus that resurrected and ascended will descend and that will be the end... that will go on forever.

Verse 24 – “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.” The image is of a victorious Jesus presenting the finished product to God the Father as a display of his success. And what is that finished product? A totally renewed world where there is no more sin, no more evil, no more opposition, no more suffering, no more disaster, no more death. This is what Jesus is working on right now as he reigns at the Father’s right hand. He’s plundering Satan’s crumbling kingdom and expanding his. He’s tying more and more people from the nations to his rope. Some people don’t see it. But **with the resurrection of Jesus something big has begun.**

I’m reading this novel about a Jewish boy with an unusual gift of art – *My Name Is Asher Lev*. In it Asher visits an art museum and to the embarrassment of his mother he is mesmerized by the paintings depicting Jesus, especially his agony on the Cross. He asks his mother about this man. She tells him –

“Jesus was a Jew who lived in Eretz Yisroel at the time of the Romans. The Romans killed him. That was the way Romans executed people. They hung them from those big poles, the way you saw in the paintings.’

“Were many Jews killed by the Romans?’

“Thousands. Tens of thousands.’

“Why did the Romans kill Jesus?’

“He said he was the moshiach. They thought he would make a revolution against them.’

“Was he the moshiach, Mama?’

“No. He was not the moshiach. The moshiach has not yet come, Asher. Look how much suffering there is in the world. Would there be so much suffering if the moshiach had really come?’”⁹

I can understand how someone might see things this way. There are still wicked rulers and corrupt authorities and evil powers at work in this broken world. But what is missing from this picture of Jesus? The resurrection. What if? What if he did come back to life and conquer death? Paul is saying, in fact, that is what has happened. He has triumphed over Satan and his henchmen. He has broken the power of death. He has provided an alternative federal head to Adam. **With the resurrection of Jesus, something big has begun.** It’s not completed yet, but it will be, just like you know in two months we will be grilling out with green grass and baseball on TV because the tulips have sprouted.

Verse 25 – “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” This is an allusion to Ps. 8 and Ps. 110. If you look at those passages you see the OT understanding that humans were made to rule the world. Adam was supposed to be fruitful and multiply and extend God’s rule over all creation. But he failed. He let in God’s enemy and let him wreak havoc. And death spread to all men. But there was a hope of a Messiah who would succeed where Adam failed, who would make all God’s enemies his footstool. Jesus fulfills that hope in his flawless life, vicarious death, victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension. He is changing peoples’ lives right now, transferring people from Adam to himself, establishing churches among the nations, bringing his kingdom, destroying the works of the devil. It’s begun. It’s not finished. But it will be when he comes again.

Verse 26 – “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death still comes to his people (several of us were at a funeral yesterday), but when Christ returns he will abolish death once and for all by bringing about the general resurrection of the dead. We have a guarantee of this by his own resurrection in the middle of history. Speaking about those who had “fallen asleep in the Lord” Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4 that “Jesus died and rose again.... [and one day] will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1Thess. 4:14, 16-17). That’s the grand finale, the final state.

Have you ever been to an elaborate fireworks show at the Fourth of July? You’re waiting, waiting for the sun to go down, for the full darkness. And then there is the first explosion, which kicks off this series of oohs and ahs. And then come the grand finale – a spectacular barrage of color and sound that overwhelms you. It’s another level. And

your face is lit up with delight. But then it eventually ends. Well, the resurrection of Christ is the first explosion. Resurrection power has erupted into our dark world filled with anticipation. And that power is at work throughout history, bringing people into spiritual union with Christ and life in him. But there will be a deafening grand finale one day that takes everything to a whole new level as millions upon millions are resurrected to join in the chorus of praise to God. And this will never, ever end. It will go on forever and ever.

Let's look at the last two verses in this section. Others have pointed out that "[a]s he sketches the grandeur of God's culminating purposes, Paul's language drifts towards doxology."¹⁰ "With a few bold strokes he paints a thrilling picture of God's final, complete supremacy."¹¹ "For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'all things are put in subjection,' [a citation from Ps. 8:6] 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."

This has confused people. Is this saying that there is some kind of eternal subjection within the Trinity? That the Father is more important than the Son, or something like that? No. Here is a really helpful statement from Augustine to help us when we come across passages like this. The great Augustine from the fourth and fifth centuries said: "The rule... is this: when the Scriptures say of the Son that he is less than the Father the Scriptures mean in respect to the assumption of humanity. But when the Scriptures point out that he is equal, they are understood in respect to his deity."¹² Here Paul is clearly referring to the incarnate Son, the perfect human, the Last Adam, assuming our flesh and fulfilling for us what we were supposed to be all along – righteous rulers of this world. Jesus is God the Son in human flesh conquering sin and Satan and death and establishing an eternal human society on earth that perfectly reflects God's glory. He has come and inaugurated his kingdom. He is reigning now, ironically advancing his kingdom in spite and even through suffering, and he will come again one day to consummate the kingdom – to eliminate death altogether and glorify us and make us to reign with him on the earth.

And when all that happens the incarnate Son of God will present the perfected kingdom to God the Father as if to say, "See what has happened? It's all for you!" Look at that last phrase – "that God may be all in all." The grand finale will mean all distraction will be gone and we will all be transfixed by the glory of God. No divided loyalties. No obstructions. No barriers. But endless, pure delight in God as human existence was meant to be experienced. It's mind-blowing. That is what we're headed for.

And **with the resurrection of Jesus, this big thing has begun!** It's not just a fairy tale happy ending. It's founded, it's grounded, it's real, it's started when Christ walked out of that tomb, overturning Adam's legacy of death and introducing a new power into the world that is at work right now, as demonstrated in baptisms, and it will most certainly be completed at the soon Second Coming.

Conclusion

The question is: are you ready for that? Christ had died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Will you be found in him, whether dead or alive? Or will you still be in

Adam? If so, you will be raised, but to go to eternal punishment. Life in Adam is marked by sorrow and fleeting joys here and unimaginable horror at the Second Coming and beyond. But you can come into Christ right now. Repent of your sins. Acknowledge your inability or and the inability of any other person to bring the deliverance that you long for. And put all your trust and hope in Christ who lived the perfect life you could never live, died the penal death you deserve to die, and then got up as the undisputed champion of the world. He is the firstfruits of the future resurrection. He is the federal head of a new humanity. And he is coming again to bring about the grand finale that will never end. This is the big picture of the universe. Is this

The Lord's Table

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, March 15, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper, 1950), 51-52.

² Kim Riddlebarger, *First Corinthians*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Powder Springs: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), 436.

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 572-73.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1987), 34.

⁶ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 761.

⁷ Ibid., 763.

⁸ Riddlebarger, 443.

⁹ Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 169-70.

¹⁰ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:982.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 [1958]), 213.

¹² Augustine, *Questions* 69:1; qtd. in Ciampa and Rosner, 777.