

1 Corinthians 15:20-34

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[0 : 0 0] Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. We are looking at chapter 15, verses 20 to 34. This morning it's page 961.

If you are looking in a pew Bible, please join me as we read from Paul's words to the Corinthians and God's words to us.

Verse 20, but in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive, but each in his own order. Christ the firstfruits, then, and his coming, those who belong to Christ.

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

[1 : 1 1] The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 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 has accepted 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.

Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour?

I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord. I die every day. What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?

If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Do not be deceived. Bad company ruins good morals. Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning, for some have no knowledge of God.

[2 : 2 0] I say this to your shame. We're in the middle of Paul's most extensive discourse on the resurrection. And as we've said, this chapter isn't just one more on the laundry list of topics that Paul wants to address, issues in the Corinthian church.

It's really the crown and the conclusion and the capstone of the letter. Paul began by saying, this is of first importance.

Nothing else matters without it, and everything else makes sense in light of it. Last week, Paul was asking the negative question, what if it's not true?

What if there is no resurrection from the dead? What if even Christ has not been raised? And Paul says, in that case, our preaching is in vain.

Your faith is in vain. We are misrepresenting God. You are still in your sins. The dead in Christ have perished, and we're of all people most to be pitied. But now Paul turns in verse 20 and makes his positive claim.

[3 : 30] He says, but in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. That's the thesis statement of this whole chapter. And the rest of this passage and the rest of this chapter, Paul explains what it means and why it matters.

The first paragraph, verse 20 to 28, tells us what it means in the big picture of everything, how the resurrection of Christ reveals God's larger plans for his people and for his creation from the beginning all the way to the end.

And then verses 29 to 34 tell us why it matters in our day-to-day lives. What difference it makes to following Jesus in the present.

You see, Paul's assumption here is that what we believe about the future significantly impacts how we behave in the present. What we hope for makes a big difference in terms of how we act and live day by day.

Now, in this passage, Paul is addressing a group of Christian believers. But let me acknowledge, some of you may not be Christians. Some of you may say, how could you believe that a man really died, and after three days of his body lying in a grave, he got up and came back to life?

[4 : 50] That sounds like a fairy tale. I guess it's a beautiful idea, but how could you have any confidence that actually happened in human history? That's a very legitimate question.

And we addressed it two weeks ago in verses 1 to 11. So you can look at that sermon from two weeks ago if you're interested in that. Paul, I'm not going to repeat what I said then, but you can talk to me or talk to other Christians.

We can point you to some resources if that's a question that you have. But this morning we're focusing on what the resurrection means in the big picture of everything and why it matters in our everyday lives.

In other words, you could say we're really asking, is it coherent? Does it make sense within a larger worldview? And is it relevant? What difference would it make if it were true?

So let's jump in. First, what it means in the big picture of everything, verses 22, 28. And there's two things in this section that we're going to see.

[5 : 53] The resurrection of Jesus is, number one, the restoration of God's purpose from the beginning. And second, it's the guarantee that God's purpose will prevail in the end.

This is a complicated... this whole passage is pretty dense. But that's basically what Paul's doing. He's starting from the beginning and then looking toward the end. So notice how Paul points back to God's purposes from the beginning in creation.

If you look at verse 21 and 22, Paul refers to Adam, the first of God's image-bearing human beings, the representative of all humanity.

The word Adam is the Hebrew word for mankind, right? Paul also refers back to Psalm 8, which we read earlier in the service, which poetically describes God's creation.

The heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place. And then it describes the place of humanity within God's created order. You have made him... you have made man a little lower than the heavenly beings.

[7 : 00] And crowned him with glory and honor. You've given him dominion over the works of your hands and put all things under his feet. In other words, God's purpose from the very beginning was that humanity represented in Adam would be God's wise, image-bearing rulers over creation.

In other words, God made us in his image to rule over creation under God as God's representatives in the world. But of course, if you read Genesis chapter 3, or even if you just look around at the world, we see that ever since the beginning, human beings have not fulfilled our calling to rule over creation under God.

Right? From the very beginning, we refused to be under God's lordship. Eve listened to the voice of the serpent. Adam followed Eve's example, even though he knew better.

And the result was they became alienated from God and each other. They were sentenced to spiritual and physical death. And all creation was subjected to futility and corruption.

And because we refuse to be under God, we can't rule over the world that God has given us. Paul would say, just look at what we do with our physical bodies. That is the first piece of creation that we are commanded to have dominion over, is our physical bodies.

[8 : 25] Our bodies were intended by God to be portable temples. That is, walking demonstrations of his presence in which God's holy presence would dwell and through whom he would be displayed to the world.

But consider what we have done with our own bodies. Sometimes we worship our own bodies. Greedily seeking to indulge our impulses. Making it our goal to pursue fleshly pleasures.

Or vainly seeking to put ourselves on display and get other people to notice us. Sometimes we worship other people's bodies. Fixating on them in lust or with envy.

Or at other times we dishonor our own and other people's bodies. When we treat them as something ugly and inferior and unredeemable.

Not worth caring for. Or perhaps when we despise people of the opposite sex or people of another racial background. Or despise people of our own sex or our own race.

[9 : 33] In all these ways we fail to recognize our bodies for what God created them to be. And then of course many aspects of our bodies aren't under our control.

They're easily devastated by sickness and injuries. And ultimately they're subject to death. And if we look around at the world beyond our own bodies isn't this what we see?

That human beings having refused to live under God's authority are now unable to rightly rule over creation. Creation groans, the Bible says, under the reign of sin and death.

Under the rule of powers and authorities that are hostile to God. But what Paul says here is that God has not given up on His creation.

And He has not given up on humanity. In raising Jesus from the dead, God has demonstrated His commitment to restoring His purpose in creation.

[10 : 32] To restoring humanity in Jesus to be God's wise, image-bearing stewards of creation. We see that what Adam failed to be and do, Jesus Christ has come to be and do.

Verse 22, for as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. In other words, Christ has come to reverse and undo Adam's fall and its effects.

Just as death is the destiny of all human beings who are led by and identified with Adam, life is now the destiny of all those who are led by and identified with Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah.

Romans 5, Paul elaborates on this more. He says, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man and much more. But much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness, much more will we reign in life through Jesus Christ.

So, in other words, God has not abandoned us. He hasn't discarded us to start all over again with some other creatures on some other planet in some other part of the universe.

[11 : 49] No, He sent Jesus the Messiah to be the beginning of a new humanity and to restore humanity's rightful rule over creation. That's how Paul points us back to the beginning.

He says the resurrection of Jesus shows that God is restoring His purpose for humanity from the very beginning. But then he says the resurrection of Jesus guarantees that God's purpose will prevail in the end.

Verse 20 and 23, Paul says, the risen Christ... The word Christ simply means King or Messiah. So, when we say Jesus Christ, we're really saying King Jesus.

Paul says in verse 20 and 23, the risen King Jesus is the first fruits. Now, that was a familiar metaphor in an agricultural society. When you saw the first fruits, the first crop of the year, it was the guarantee of a future harvest to come.

Even in our own very modest backyard garden, we have a tomato plant that's doing quite well. And our kids were very excited that this plant that was planted in April, as a little tiny scrawny thing that we bought in a store, right, had actually grown and produced tomatoes a couple weeks ago.

[13 : 09] And they were excited because they knew that it was going to keep on doing that. For the rest of the summer, it was only the beginning. In the Old Testament, the first fruits of the crops or the flock were offered to God as an offering of worship, and it had to be without blemish.

A flawless sacrifice. As a recognition of God's gracious provision. And so, it's an appropriate metaphor to use for Christ, for Jesus.

God's gracious provision. The flawless sacrifice. The guarantee of our future inheritance. Paul's saying when we... The resurrection of Jesus guarantees that God's purposes will prevail in the end.

Verse 23, Paul talks about the coming of Christ. And that word coming is the word used for a royal appearance. It's when the emperor would go and visit a far-off city in his empire.

And when he would arrive for his official visit with all the pomp and fanfare, and everyone would see who was really in charge. And all who belonged to him would acclaim him and would celebrate and rejoice.

[14 : 27] And Paul says when King Jesus returns and comes in glory, those who belong to him, who believe in him, will be raised with him to rejoice with him.

Verse 24, Paul goes on. Verse 24 to 26, Paul says, then comes the end. So, he describes the end as the final victory of the Messiah over all God's enemies.

Verse 24, he will destroy every rule and every authority and power. Now, if you notice in Paul's letters when he uses those words, rulers, authorities, and powers, he doesn't usually use them in a neutral sense.

He's almost always referring to corrupted authorities that are trying to compete with God. So, Ephesians 6, we don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

And that's how he's using the terms here. Christ will reign, verse 25, until he has put all his enemies under his feet, and the last enemy of which is death.

[15 : 42] And we can know this because in the resurrection, Christ has conquered and demonstrated his victory over death. And that's the guarantee that one day, in the end, he'll be victorious over everything that stands against him.

The deceptive lies of Satan, the empty boasts of humans, the addictive allure of idols, and the looming jaws of death.

All will lose their power before the resurrected coming King Jesus. You know, think about it this way. What is the biggest threat that anyone can make against you to try to get you to do what they want?

I'll fire you. I'll destroy your reputation. I'll leave you. I'll kill you. Paul's saying if Jesus Christ has conquered even death, and if he will one day judge the world in righteousness and raise his people to life again, then even the most fear-inducing threats are no longer all-powerful because they cannot outlast Jesus.

He's bigger than them all. N.T. Wright put it this way. At the conclusion of his long book on the resurrection, he wrote this. He said, So this is what Paul is saying.

[17 : 56] In the big picture of everything, the resurrection of Jesus restores God's purposes from the beginning, and it guarantees that they'll prevail in the end. And then verse 28, when Paul's describing the end, he brings us back once again to the beginning.

Not only will King Jesus defeat all his enemies, including death, he will lead all creation in willing obedience to God. Unlike Adam, who rejected God's authority, Jesus, as the head of a new humanity, will gladly acknowledge God's authority over him.

That's the point of verse 28. Verse 27, 28 can be a mouthful, but verse 28, you sort of see the point. When all things are subjected to him, that is to Jesus, to the Son, Christ, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him, who put all things in subjection under him, that is, subjected to God.

And you might say, well, what does that mean? Now, the word translated subjection in 27 and 28 can also be translated something like order.

It's actually the same root word as the word that is translated order in verse 23. But the point is, so the Son himself will be put in order under God or subjected to God.

[19 : 21] Now, you might say, well, wait a minute. That sounds a little weird, right? Is Paul saying that somehow God the Son is less than God the Father by being subjected to him?

And the answer is no, because Jesus the Son is fully God and fully human. And because he's fully God, Jesus shares eternally in the Father's glory and authority.

And there are plenty of other passages that emphasize that truth about Jesus' equality with God. But here he emphasizes that the Son is willingly obedient to God because he is the representative human being.

He's fulfilling the human vocation described in Psalm 8 to rule over all creation under God. And so he's restoring the creation order.

God ruling over his image-bearing human beings who are in turn ruling over creation. And Jesus is our representative as our human brother. Father. So again, he's... So that's, I think, what verse 28 is referring to.

[20 : 33] And then we come to the conclusion of this first section where Paul says, the purpose of all of this is that God may be all in all. I mean, this is a breathtaking section to read and meditate on.

That Jesus Christ will one day defeat all his enemies and bring all creation back to willing obedience to God the Father. That God may be all in all.

And Paul says, remember, if that was Christ's purpose, that God might one day be all in all. To bring all creation and willing obedience to God.

Is that not our purpose too? Paul has already said this in 1 Corinthians. At the end of some of the major sections, he says, glorify God in your body. Whatever you eat and drink and whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.

Philippians 2, Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father. That is the great purpose of our lives. That's God's greatest great purpose from beginning to end.

[21 : 39] That we might display the... Point to the majesty and greatness of God and display the goodness and kindness of God. And that is the great purpose of Christ. And we can be included in him.

So that's what the resurrection means in the big picture of everything, the first part. But now we'll see why it matters in our day-to-day lives. Verse 29 to 34.

The first thing we see from verse 29 is that Christian baptism doesn't make sense without, apart from, the resurrection. Otherwise, Paul says, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead?

If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? And probably all of you are going, what in the world does that mean? You know, if you haven't realized it yet, we don't baptize people in the place of, and for the benefit of, people who have died already.

There is no such benefit. Okay? And we have no such practice. Now, the commentaries all agree on two things. Number one, this is the most obscure verse in the whole book.

[22 : 49] And number two, we can't be totally sure what it means. Some people have counted as many as 40 different interpretations that people have come up with over the years. Now, acknowledging that, what can we say about this verse?

First question, does it mean that some of the Corinthians were actually being baptized in the place of, or for the benefit of, others who had already died?

Maybe family members, or people who had come to faith in Christ but hadn't got baptized and suddenly died. Now, today, the Mormons do just that.

And they point to this verse as their justification. The Mormons say baptism is essential for salvation in the kingdom of God. And so, in order to give people who haven't been baptized a chance to enter God's kingdom, a living person may be baptized on behalf of a deceased person.

During the early church period, the second century and later on, there were some relatively minor sects, followers of Marcion and Serinthus, both of whom were declared heretics.

[23 : 59] They also seem to have practiced baptism on behalf of deceased persons, also on the basis of this passage. Now, is that what some of the Corinthians were doing? And if so, was Paul simply tolerating a rather odd practice in the context of a pretty dysfunctional church?

Because he was choosing his battles and couldn't correct everything at once. Some people think so. But I think that view is almost certainly wrong for the following reasons.

Number one, apart from this one verse, there is no biblical or historical evidence, there's no other reference anywhere that we know of, to any such practice in Paul's churches or any other Christian communities in the first century.

And it is always dangerous to confidently conclude something based on only one verse in the Bible with no other supporting evidence.

In another place, Paul quotes the Old Testament principle, every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. It's a good legal principle. It's also a good biblical interpretation principle.

[25 : 10] Compare Scripture with Scripture, and if you only got one, you don't got a lot to go on. Second, we know of no similar practices in Jewish culture or in pagan religions during Paul's time from which the Corinthians would have got this idea.

Now, the Corinthian church was a mess, right? We've already seen that. So if any of the churches might have been doing this, maybe it was them. But, you know, every other crazy thing that they were doing, right, greed, sexual immorality, class divisions, all those other things were very common in their culture.

You can easily see where they borrowed those practices from. Not so with this. Third, Paul seems to commend or approve of whatever he is describing in verse 29.

He's saying people are being motivated by their belief in the resurrection to do this. Just as I'm being motivated to courageous self-sacrifice.

He uses himself as an example in 30 to 32, verse 30 to 32. And both of those are parallel. There's two rhetorical questions in each set of verses, right?

[26 : 27] And Paul's saying these practices are motivated by belief in the resurrection. So why would Paul promote something that is so wildly out of step with his understanding of baptism or even speak positively of it or refer to it?

So, there are better understandings of this verse that make more sense within Paul's larger frame of thought. Here is what I think is the best understanding of this verse.

The phrase translated in the ESV on behalf of or in the NIV for can also be translated on account of. So that's the first thing.

Second, verse 18. If you look up at verse 18, it indicates that some of the Corinthian Christians had already died. They had fallen asleep in Christ. Now, in the early church and today, many Christians have borne powerful witness to Jesus Christ as they have died.

Some died as martyrs and others have faced death with unwavering faith and hope in the bodily resurrection. And many times, other people have come to faith because of the witness of a dying Christian.

[27 : 43] So the Apostle Paul came to faith partly because of the witness of the martyr, Stephen. And so when Paul was baptized, he could have said something like, I am here on account of the witness of the faithful martyr, Stephen.

Stephen is now dead, but I look forward to seeing him and worshiping Christ with him in the resurrection. I think that's the most likely understanding of what Paul means by being baptized on account of the dead.

That is being baptized on account of the faithful testimony of Christian believers who have previously died. And with the hope of worshiping Christ with them in the bodily resurrection.

And it makes sense of Paul's train of thought because he says, if the dead aren't raised, why would you do that? Why would you hope to see them again? And why would you be baptized?

Because of their testimony. Christian baptism doesn't make sense apart from the resurrection. So I think that's what we make of that difficult verse.

[29 : 01] But then Paul goes on to say, it's not just Christian baptism that doesn't make sense without the resurrection, it's Christian suffering. And Paul points to his own life as an example in these verses.

Verse 30, he says, I'm in danger every hour. Verse 31, he says, I die every day. Verse 32, I fought with beasts at Ephesus. Now you read these verses, you can tell Paul's got a little riled up here.

He's got a bit of righteous indignation, which is not a bad thing, as long as you keep it under control. Paul didn't literally fight wild beasts in Ephesus. He's speaking metaphorically.

He's saying, I've been dealing with dangerous and powerful opponents. Blood thirsty antagonists who wanted to tear him to pieces. Paul was writing this letter from Ephesus.

In fact, in the next chapter, chapter 16, verse 9, Paul mentions, there are many adversaries here who are against me. According to Acts 19, some of them provoked a riot in reaction to his preaching.

[30 : 07] Paul's not exaggerating. His life was in danger. He was facing a lot of opposition and antagonism.

And you know, if you go through what Paul went through, you lose some of the wishy-washy, cowardly politeness that sometimes characterizes our speech.

Paul is pretty straight and to the point here. He says, what in the world do I gain, humanly speaking? That is, from a merely human point of view, without the hope of the resurrection, if the... what do I gain from all this suffering?

What do I gain from facing all this opposition for the sake of the gospel? If the dead aren't raised, Paul says, let's just try to feel good. Let's just try to enjoy ourselves while we can. Party like there's no tomorrow, because you only live once.

But Paul says, that is the futility of life without hope. It's the futility of life without hope that is based in God and hope in the bodily resurrection.

[31 : 18] And it's a way of life that will only end in judgment. As one person said, the resurrection means endless hope. No resurrection means a hopeless end.

You see, Paul made courageous choices to sacrifice his own comfort and even to risk his own safety for the sake of the gospel of Jesus.

And he did it because he wasn't just calculating risk and reward from a human, this life-focused point of view. He was looking at things in light of resurrection, hope, and promise.

The problem for some in the Corinthian church was that there was nothing in their life that only made sense in light of the resurrection.

They called themselves Christians. They even considered themselves spiritually advanced. But they had abandoned belief in the bodily resurrection because in their lives, Paul says, their lives reflected that.

[32 : 22] And that's why Paul concludes this passage with such a sharp rebuke. Rebuke. Don't be deceived. Bad company ruins good morals. That word company means something you belong to, like a clique or a group or a gang.

Paul's saying, belonging to a bad group that's influencing you in bad ways, watch out for that. You belong to Christ. Let Christ and His people be those who are influencing you.

He's not saying don't deal... He's not saying don't associate with anyone outside the church. He's not saying that. He's not saying don't associate with anyone of dubious character.

Jesus was well known for doing that. He's saying, beware that you're not led astray. And He says, wake up. Wake up from your drunken stupor, whether He's talking literally or spiritually.

He's saying you've become complacent. And some of you have no knowledge of God. Here's the question I want to end on and consider for a few minutes.

[33 : 38] Paul could point to specific aspects of his own life. Choices that he had made that made no sense apart from the hope of the resurrection.

Can you? Let me give a couple examples. Is there a person in your life, perhaps a spouse or a co-worker, a family member or brother or sister in Christ whom you are called to love, but they are ungrateful and rude toward you, and yet you have continued to speak truth and show kindness to them regardless?

From a merely human point of view, that doesn't make sense. If you're not getting any payback from the relationship, and if you don't foresee that you will soon be getting payback, you might as well cut it off or make them pay and find somebody else to speak truth and show kindness to.

But in light of the resurrection, that changes things. Another example. The week before last, my family and I were at a retreat, and the speakers were a married couple who had opened their home over a period of several years to seven boys at a time who were coming out of juvenile jails where they also conducted Bible studies.

From a merely human point of view, that makes little sense. But Christ said, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind because they can't repay you, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

[35 : 30] Do we extend hospitality? Whether it's just reaching out to welcome someone new at church, even if you feel awkward about it and wouldn't normally do that, or inviting someone to share a meal with you that isn't already a close friend, or even inviting people to actually live with you.

Do we extend hospitality in ways that are costly and stretching because we know where our true home is? Another example, maybe you've been severely depressed.

Maybe you've been at the point of being tempted to end your own life, but you have resisted that temptation because you know that suicide will never glorify God, and it's certainly not the way you want to arrive at the judgment seat of Christ.

And so you've continued to entrust your body and your mind to the Lord day by day, trusting that somehow He's working for good, even through all your pain, even when you can't see how your life in this world will ever get better.

That's living in hope of the resurrection. Another example, over the years, I've had extensive conversations with several brothers in Christ who have only felt sexual attraction to other men and yet are committed to honoring God's design for marriage as the union of male and female.

[37 : 01] Their choice to pursue celibacy makes no sense to most of their peers who would say, this is who you are. Why would you repress your true self?

Seek fulfillment in finding a partner. And they have said, no, at the deepest level, I belong to Christ. And though I experience this on an ongoing basis and I don't expect it to change immediately, I belong to Christ who loved me and gave Himself for me.

And as the title of the book says, I'm washed and waiting. Cleanse from sin and shame but awaiting the redemption of our bodies. And this is just what it looks like for me.

So let me ask, are there specific aspects of your life? Choices that you have made and continue to make that make no sense apart from the resurrection. Paul said, I die every day.

And Jesus said, if you want to follow me, you must take up your cross daily and follow me. And most of the time, we don't get to choose what kind of cross or what kind of burden we want to bear.

[38 : 16] Whether it's a physical disability or chronic pain or clinical depression or the effects of childhood trauma, a dysfunctional family, being the victim of racism or persecution, parenting a rebellious child, marriage to a difficult spouse, most of the time, we don't choose those burdens.

The question is, how will we deal with them? And in every case, the hope of the resurrection makes all the difference. Because the only way you can take up your cross is if you actually believe in the resurrection.

And that's what Jesus promised. He says, if you want to save your life, if you hold on to it, if you grab hold of everything in this life, you're going to one day lose it all. But if you lose it for my sake, you'll gain it all over again.

He said, you'll even start to gain it back in this life and in the age to come, you'll have eternal life. His promise to the rich young ruler or to his disciples after the rich young ruler left.

Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come, eternal life.

[39 : 46] Jesus said, whatever he calls you to give up, he will repay many times over. This is why the resurrection matters.

Shows us God's purpose from beginning to end and it makes a difference in our everyday lives. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. O God, who for our redemption gave your Son to the death of the cross and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy, grant us so to die daily to sin that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection.

Lord, grant that we may experience a foretaste of that joy even as we worship you this morning and even as we continue on our earthly pilgrimage toward the heavenly city where our true home is.

We pray this through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen. Amen. Amen.