

**Text:** 1 Corinthians 15:20-24

**Title:** The Resurrection, Part 4

**Truth:** All people will be resurrected, each at their appointed time.

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## Introduction

The subject matter of 1 Corinthians 15 is the doctrine of resurrection—the resurrection of Christ primarily, but also its corollary, that all people will be raised from the dead. Paul defends the truth of the resurrection of Christ as a central and non-negotiable aspect of the good news. He explores what the faith would be like if there were no resurrection, and then explains some aspects of the glorious resurrection of believers and how it is our certain hope. We can continue to work for God in hope because our work is not in vain. It is meaningful because in the end we will be raised with Christ. If the resurrection were not true, then our Christian lives would be meaningless.

The outline of the chapter is:

1. The saving gospel message, v. 1-11
  - a. The gospel message itself, v. 1-4
  - b. The corroborating witnesses of the resurrection, v. 5-11
2. A hypothetical: what if no resurrection at all? v. 12-19
3. The resurrection culminates in the kingdom and glory of God, v. 20-28
  - a. Fact of bodily resurrection for all people, v. 20-24a
  - b. The reign of Christ and the reign of the Father, v. 24b-28
4. Christianity is useless apart from resurrection, v. 29-34
5. The constitution of the resurrection body, v. 35-49
6. The glorious resurrection of believers, 50-58

The focus of this message is on the third major section. Last time, we examined the “terrible hypothetical:” what if there is no such thing as resurrection? Paul explained that obviously then Christ would not be alive, and then he gave eight other consequences. These

ranged from emptiness in Christian preaching to believers still in their sins to Christians being the most pitiable of all people because there is no hope.

But verse 20 brings us back to reality: Christ *is* risen! He is risen indeed! This has its own set of consequences. We will see some in the upcoming verses: the resurrection of all people and victory over death.

## I. Some Consequences of the Resurrection of Christ

- A. Romans 4:24-25. Christ was crucified because of our sins and resurrected because of our justification. This is a tremendous truth, and the sense of it is that *because of the resurrection of Christ from the dead* we can be confident that our Christian justification is complete.
- B. Acts 17:30-31. God commands all people everywhere to repent because there is coming a day of judgment. That judgment will be meted out by Jesus Christ. We can be assured of future judgment *because of the resurrection of Christ from the dead*.
- C. Ephesians 1:19-20. The resurrection of Christ demonstrates the power God and how God works in the life of a Christian. *Because of the resurrection of Christ from the dead*, we know the nature of the power of God at work in us to sanctify us and guide our church.

There is another consequence of the resurrection of Christ:

## II. The Resurrection of All People, 20-22

- A. After demonstrating the folly of those who say there is no resurrection, Paul reasserts that in fact Christ **has** risen from the dead. The earlier evidence he cited is irrefutable. With hundreds of eyewitnesses, there can be no question about the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.
- B. Christ has become the firstfruits of those who are dead (“fallen asleep” is a euphemism for death). *Firstfruits* refers to the Old Testament idea of the first and best part of a harvest. It was given to God as an offering that represented thanksgiving of the worshipper, but also was associated with the hopeful expectation

that God would bring in the remainder of the harvest (Exodus 23:16, Deut. 26:8-11). Jesus Christ is the first to be resurrected of an entire host of people who will be resurrected with a body like His. In other words, consequent to Christ's resurrection, many others will also experience resurrection. His resurrection is not a mere wish for ourselves, but a certainty that we will be raised too.

This *does not* mean that Christ was the very first human raised from the dead in any fashion. There were others, such as Lazarus, and the son of the widow from Nain, and Tabitha, and some recorded in the Old Testament as well. Apparently, these people were resurrected to natural bodies subject to mortality and would have to suffer death a second time. I take *firstfruits* to mean that Christ is the first to be resurrected with a "glorified" body of the sort described in verses 35-49.

- B. It is God's design that since a man (Adam) brought death upon the world, another Man (Jesus Christ) would bring resurrection from the dead. Thus, Christ brought life from death and, by the end of world, will have reversed the effects of the curse for His people. For those that do not belong to Jesus, the effects of the curse will continue forever.
- C. Paul then makes the assertion that, just like all people die in Adam, all will be raised to life.
  - 1. The "even so" indicates the similarity of the universal nature of death and the universal nature of the resurrection. In other words, to say that "all" refers to only Christians is *incorrect*. *All* is all of humanity, whether Christians, Jews, Gentiles, OT saints, NT saints, Tribulation saints, unbelievers of all ages, everyone. Some interpreters explain that the first *all* means every one of Adam's descendants, and the second *all* means only those who are Christ's descendants. That is almost right, but the second *all* is even more expansive.

Revelation 20:11-15 supports this in that all the dead *stand* before the throne of God. Dead people do not stand—therefore they must be raised to life. Even more pointed is the text in Acts 24:15, where Paul says, "I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the

dead, both of the just **and the unjust.**” Note the emphasized portion. Yes, the unjust will rise as well.

Although this is a minor point, I think it is reasonable to ground the resurrection of the unjust in the resurrection of Christ. They do not remain dead, precisely because Jesus did not remain dead. The reason they rise is that He arose. He conquered death and that sealed the victory over death...so He can call anyone and everyone forth from the dead. He is the master of death. He also sealed the fate of the unbeliever that they would be raised and judged before God. See also Acts 17:31 about the universal judgment, where resurrected people will appear.

2. We must not be confused that the resurrection of all people means that all will be resurrected to the same outcome. That wrong idea is put to rest by later verses in this chapter, and also by other sections of Scripture. Primary among them is John 5:28-29 and Daniel 12:2. There are two “types” of resurrection—one to life, and one to judgment. Whether these all happen at the same time or at various times is a separate question discussed in the upcoming verses.

This means that unbelievers will die and experience the horrors of Hades immediately after their physical death. Then they will be resurrected. The first thing they will experience after their resurrection is the Great White Throne judgment. That is a scary reality.

### **III. The Order of Resurrections, 23-24a**

- A. Much has been written on the term “order” in verse 23. It is used to refer to a division or grouping, in an orderly sequence our grouping. It is used once in the Greek translation of 2 Samuel 23:13 to refer to a troop of Philistine soldiers.
  1. The words “his own” points out the fact that there is more than one grouping, and each will be made alive in their own division or group.
  2. Then, because of the words *firstfruits*, *afterward*, and *then*, it is evident that the text then gives us a high-level breakdown of three orders or groups, as the following sections will detail.

3. The same Greek words *afterward* and *then* are significant in that they appear in 15:5, 6, 7 (two times), followed by “last of all” in verse 8. This indicates a chronological arrangement. We believe that the same holds true in 15:23-24, so that the resurrections are listed in chronological order. The order is as follows.

- B. Christ, the **firstfruits**. This was explained above. The first resurrection of the “glorified” type that we are talking about happened with Jesus Christ. It is a bodily resurrection that is the pattern of all other resurrections of this sort. The believer will be resurrected after this pattern, according to Philippians 3:21 and 1 John 3:2. The latter passage may well speak to our morally pure likeness to Christ and not so much focus on our physical likeness to Him, but the point is established in any case.
- C. After Christ, then the **second group** is “those who are Christ’s at His coming.” This group is defined by two things: personal connection to Christ and timing.

1. Personal connection to Christ: The grammar indicates possession or ownership, that these people belong to Christ. That means, in short, that they are saved people, not unbelievers.

There is some question about when exactly Old Testament believers are raised. Most Christians don’t consider this question to be even worth asking. A debate over this should not sidetrack us from the big picture of what Paul is saying here.

But we who are dispensationalists do ask the question and, though it is not a hill to die on, so to speak, it does seem that the *church* will be resurrected at the rapture, and the *OT saints* a bit later when Christ actually comes down to the earth after the Tribulation. The Tribulation saints will definitely be resurrected at the end of the Tribulation, because they die *in* the Tribulation and then at the end they are shown reigning with Christ, Revelation 20:4. I consider all of these resurrections to be part of this second group, all of which take part in the blessed resurrection prior to the 1000 years (Rev. 20:6). Recall that there is another group who will be resurrected after the

1000 years (Rev. 20:5). The third group is comprised of unbelievers (see D. below).

2. Timing: Two portions indicate the time, and both are important to note, for if these are ignored, the whole point of the section is missed. The key word is then/afterward/after that (Greek: *epeita*). It specifies an ordered arrangement of things. This is supported by the last phrase “at His coming.” That clearly means that this event will happen when Jesus returns. Obviously, He has not yet returned, and a massive resurrection has not yet taken place. We are talking about a physical, bodily resurrection like that of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are thinking of some kind of figurative or “spiritual” resurrection, then you are in another dimension that is not Biblical reality.

D. The **third grouping** or ordering is specified after another “then” (eita in Greek). It seems clear that Paul is saying that after the resurrection of Christ, and after the second coming of Christ and associated resurrection of believers, there will be another massive resurrection. We again must deal with two issues: who, and when?

1. Who is left to be resurrected? The answer is all those who have not trusted in Christ. The text actually does not mention unbelievers, rather leaving it for us to figure out the obvious.
2. As for the timing of this third group, it is at “the end.” Since there is some delay between the firstfruits (Christ) and the second group—at least two thousand years so far—it seems feasible that there could be some delay between the resurrection of the second group and the third.

This fits perfectly with how we understand eschatology to work, where Christ returns, reigns for 1000 years, and *then* the final resurrection and judgments unfold. And in fact, this is what Revelation 20:4 speaks of when it refers to saints who had died and then lived and reigned with Christ for 1000 years, the so-called millennial kingdom. They took part in the “first” resurrection, which is letter C above, what I have called the “second group.” But then verse 5 makes an ominous note: the rest of the dead did not live again until the 1000 years were finished. That refers to this third group who are raised “at the

end.” They must, by implication, not belong to Christ. This resurrection program could not be more clearly specified in the text of Scripture, yet there is massive confusion surrounding this concept among most Christians.

## **Conclusion**

Take away these truths:

1. All people will be raised from the dead, each at the designated time of the group they are in—saved or unsaved.
2. Adam’s sin brought death to all, but Christ’s righteous act conquers death and brings eternal blessed life to all who belong to Him.
3. As discouraging and disappointing as death is, it is not the end of your existence!

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