

## **Sermon 57: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28: How we are Resurrected in Christ**

### **OUTLINE**

The firstfruits  
The second coming

### **INTRODUCTION**

When a preacher prepares a sermon he is always asking himself the question, how does this truth apply in the life of the believer? Well, today's sermon is going to be a little bit different. Very often the preacher is encouraged to end a sermon impressing upon the people of God what they ought to do. The sermon today is not about your doing but about what Jesus has done. Today I want you to leave not thinking about what you must do, but rather about what He will do. Today your responsibility to listen, to understand and allow the glorious truths that you are about to hear to wash over you and rise up in you as joy and confidence and assurance. Today we are getting into the nuts and bolts of how we are resurrected in Christ.

You will have noticed as we read through the text that it is jam packed full of what Jesus has accomplished. Paul you will remember is correcting the wrong idea that bodily resurrection cannot happen. He opened this chapter affirming the historical fact that Jesus did rise; then last week he spent some time dismantling the logic of the argument that denies bodily resurrection. Well, today Paul launches into a positive explanation about how Jesus resurrection will result in our own future resurrection. In fact He will show that the resurrection results in more than merely our own resurrections but the renewal of all things. Our future resurrection is only a small part of a larger work God is doing through Christ and we are swept up in it. Paul is confronting us with the amazing certainties that are ours because Christ is risen from the dead. When you leave here today your job may not be secure but your future resurrection is; you may be worried about the rise of Islamic riots in Europe but you can be confident of the final overthrow of Islam; you may be troubled over the frail state of your body, or the body of your loved on, but can leave fully assured that our bodies will be made new. So today as we look at this section we have two key ideas that we need to follow, the book ends of Christ's resurrection and second coming; these are two parts of a whole, the firstfruits and the second coming.

### **The firstfruits**

V20, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.' Paul introduces this amazing section with a famous 'but.' There are several instances in Paul where he begins with a 'but' and what follows is profound gospel truth, e.g. Rom. 3:21; 6:22, etc. The profound truth is that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead. Paul immediately goes on to show that this is not mere a bare historical truth but a profound gospel truth. Paul does this by saying that Jesus is the 'firstfruits'. Now what does this mean?

'Firstfruits' is term borrowed from the OT. It relates to the sacrificial system. Firstfruits were seen as the first part of a harvest or herd that was given to God in worship as a sign of gratitude and worship. It is an idea that also expresses organic unity between the part, what is being offered, and the whole, what is being celebrated. Paul is using the idea of firstfruits here to tell us something

wonderful about the connection between the resurrection of Christ and our own resurrection. Here are three basic ideas that we should understand by this idea of Jesus being the firstfruit.

Firstly, we should think in terms of the unity of the resurrection harvest. Jesus is the first born from the dead, the word first is hinting at a second and third and a fourth, etc. Jesus is a part of a single resurrection harvest that begins with Him but will end in the inclusion of every single believer. He is the first, and all those who die, who fall asleep, and more all those who are His will be the rest of the resurrection harvest at the end of the ages. One theologian reflecting on this writes, 'on the basis of this verse it can be said that Paul views the two resurrections not so much as two events but as two episodes of the same event' (Gaffin, p35). The two events of Christ's resurrection and our own are two parts of a single resurrection. This leads us to consider the other things we should understand by firstfruits.

Secondly, the idea of firstfruits indicates the certainty of the resurrection harvest. As a surely as Christ has risen from the dead, so surely shall we be raised as well. Christ broke the lock on death when He resurrected from the dead, He holds the keys to death and hades. Death had no right or power to keep Him, and death will have not final right or power over us. Because He lives, we will live also.

Thirdly, this idea of firstfruits communicates the newness of the resurrection harvest. You see there have been people raised from the dead before Jesus resurrection. We all know the raising of the widow of Nain's son by Christ in His incarnate ministry; there is also the raising of Lazarus from the dead. But those people were raised by a miracle, but not in their resurrection and glorified bodies. They were raised to die again. Jesus resurrection is the beginning of something new, something different. His resurrection belongs to the new age, the new creation. He is the first of His type, the prototype of human glorification. If Christ is resurrected to never die again, we too will never die again; if He was raised free from the effects of ageing and death and invulnerable to sickness, it will be the same for us. And just as He is sinless and unable to sin, we too will have a humanity better than Adam's, we will be confirmed in righteousness never being able to sin in the new creation.

It is for this reason that Paul describes the Christian dead as merely having fallen asleep. They will rise; they will receive better bodies when they rise; the certainty of this is secured by the fact of Christ's own resurrection.

V21-22, 'For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' Paul realizes that he has dropped a bomb that Greek informed minds find difficult so Paul goes into some explanations. In order to explain how we will live because Jesus lives Paul explains the whole idea of federal heads. God has appointed that in the whole of human history there are two legal representatives whose actions bring consequences upon those whom they represent. Now it is obvious that we can all act and bring consequences upon our families and those connected to us, but this is not what Paul is describing. Paul is describing what theologians call federal headship. There is the first Adam, and the Second, Jesus Christ who is also the last Adam. There is no third, there is no need for one. We do we resurrect because someone else, namely Jesus was resurrected? Because He is the second Adam. Paul explains, just like when Adam sinned, and the guilt

of His sin was imputed to us, and we received the consequence of death. In the same way, Jesus is made to function like a legal representative, so that when He obeys, the rewards for His obedience come not only upon Him, but also upon us.

Now I appreciate that this can take a little while to get your head around but this is a central truth by which God has made our salvation possible. Paul gives us a more detailed explanation in Rom. 5:12-14, 'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— <sup>13</sup> for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. <sup>14</sup> Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.' Why do we die, when the wages of sin is death? Little babies who have never sinned die, but have never sinned. Paul explains. Death is not a natural part of our lives as the image of God, we were made deathless and sinless. But Adam sinned bringing the consequence of death upon us. But there is an important connection between sin and death that we need to understand. Paul tells us that death spread to all because all sinned. Now how did we all sin if we were not there in the Garden of Eden? We sinned in our representative. Just as the Emperor of Japan brought about a new legal state when he signed the unconditional surrender after world war 2. We were brought into a new legal situation through Adam. He sinned, but because he was representing us, his sin was counted/imputed/reckoned as ours. We were not physically there but we were legally present. Through the means of a covenantal and legal bond between us and Adam, we sinned in him. The consequences of death and corruption fell upon him, and upon all who sinned in him. We reap the reward of death not only by indirect consequence of being born in a weak body, but as a direct consequence of the guilt which is ours in Adam.

But Paul's explanations do not end there, in the same way where one man acts and the legal status and consequences fall upon those who he represents. In the same way those who are represented by Christ receive His legal standing and the benefits of life that come with it. As certainly as you are a sinner and will die, so certainly are you righteous in God's eyes and will live. We have here the glorious doctrine of our justification through the imputation of an alien righteousness resulting in our final glorification and resurrection from the dead. This is a doctrine we cling to while sin still clings to us in this body. We feel our sin, the Holy Spirit gives us a greater sight of our sin than before we were saved. we see the terrible thing sin is and the judgement that it deserves as high handed rebellion against God. We could be given to terrors and fears because of our awareness of sin, but God has saved us. He has taken our sin and put it upon Jesus shoulders and He died making full payment for it; and He has put Jesus own righteousness upon our shoulders and we now stand as righteous in His sight. This not only results in present assurance but a definite future resurrection from the dead. Because if death has not right to keep the righteous man Jesus in the grace that He must be resurrected. You too die righteous in Christ and death has no right to hold you either, you too must be raised.

Paul explains that our resurrection is organically united with Christ's though separate in time, v23, 'But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.' His resurrection and ours are united though separated by time. They are two parts of a whole.

## **The second coming**

As Paul goes on to talk about that moment when we are raised from the dead, you can feel Paul growing expansive. He can't talk about that day without going into all sorts of detail about what a great day that will be. V24-26, 'Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death.' We do not often talk about eschatological positions, but here we are forced to. You will know that there are three main positions, premill, amill and postmill. These words describe the second coming and its relationship to the millennium. Premill believes that the second coming will come before the millennium; postmill, after the millennium; and amill holds a spiritual millennium view, though technically by this description it is a subset of postmill. This chapter shows that the premill and postmill views are in error. Let me show you how this chapter dismantles these wrong views before I talk about what these verses are teaching us.

Firstly, premill. I was reading a dispensational commentary as part of my preparation and the commentary said that there are technically 5 resurrections, there is the resurrection that happens at the rapture; then there is the resurrection of the saints that die during the 7 year tribulation; then along with this there is the resurrection of the OT saints, so that the saints of the tribulation and the OT will then inhabit the millennium. Then during the millennium those who become believers, if they die will be immediately resurrected, and then at the end when Jesus finally returns for the judgement there is a 5<sup>th</sup> and final resurrection of all unbelievers for judgement. Now you might ask where the signs of the end time, and all of these events are to take place in light of this chapter. Well, you see that first word 'then' at the beginning of v24. They tell us that that word indicates all of the above. In other words, they have to work hard to insert it here. But there is another problem. V51-52 we know is what happens when Jesus comes again. The trumpet is blown, dead saints are raised, and living saints are changed in the twinkling of an eye. Paul describes this as victory over death, but here is the catch, if the last enemy to be defeated is death; but after the second coming of Christ is the millennium where people still die, then death has not been defeated.

Secondly, postmill which is an optimistic view of history believes that Christ's kingdom takes shape in this world where through the evangelization of the nations, the nations will become more and more Christian and more and more the governments of this world will Christianize. So that when Jesus returns He returns to a mostly Christian world. For them v25 is the key verse, 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.' From this verse they think that the idea of a gradual overtaking of the world for Christ reaches its climax and then the last enemy to be defeated is death. I would love for this to be true, but it is also not the teaching of these verses. If you look down at our verses you will notice that Paul is describing what happens when Jesus returns. The use of the word 'destroy' in v24 as applied to 'every rule and every authority and power.' Does not teach a gradual evangelization of the world, but the sudden, one blow, victory of Jesus return described in places like Rev. 19:15, 'From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.' This chapter does not support a gradual coming in of the kingdom.

Paul has been talking about our future resurrection when death will be overcome, but he can't help but give us some other important details. Firstly, we see the certainty of Christ's present reign in the words 'for He must reign.' We know that Jesus resurrected and ascended into heaven, all authority in heaven and on earth is His. He is not waiting to sit on David's throne, He is sitting at the right hand of the Father now. This should affect the way you see history. It is not a case of the devil being strong and Jesus weak. No the devil is a defeated foe, who is thrown down to the earth, whose time is short. The book of Revelation in chapter 6 shows the unsealing of the 7 seals. It is the Lamb who has overcome who has the authority to implement the scroll that was sealed up for the last days. All that we see happening in the world today is because Jesus is on the throne, this is all part of His plan. The calamities we see in the world are not signs of a lack of reigning but rather they are a sign of His patience with rebels as the gospel continues to go out and invites them to repent and believe and bow the knee to the true King. The judgements we see are signs that Christ is handing over the nations to themselves, the multiplying of sin is a multiplying of judgement and the increase of pressure which helps us see our need for God. He is reigning right now.

We also learn not only of the victory over our guilt, but the victory over every authority and power. All demonic powers will be overcome, every earthly government will be overcome. All satanic influences and all the corruption of human governments will be brought to an end, and brought into submission before God when Jesus returns.

But of course, death itself will be defeated. This is what Paul has been driving at. All believers will one day be resurrected as we participate in His victory over death, as we participate in the outworking of His authority that began at His ascension.

Paul has made some sweeping statements, now he makes some clarifications, v27-28, '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. <sup>28</sup> 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.' Christ's present reign; and future victory over all enemies is given two important additions. Firstly, when Paul said all things he of course was not referring to God the Father. All created things are subjected to Christ, He holds the office of the firstborn over all creation. Secondly, Christ's reign as the second Adam, as the Son of David will come to a climactic end. When time is done, all enemies overcome, the new creation fully brought in, then the purpose of Christ's present reign will likewise have fulfilled its purpose, and any authority that was bequeathed to Christ as the Second Adam will be returned to God. And God will be all in all. Some have wrongly tried to infer from these verses that there are eternal relations of submission and authority in the internal relations of the Trinity, this would be to assert more than the text is saying. Christ though God is having His present Incarnate reign described. At some point, when all is done, just as Christ's crosswork was His work for a period and then ended, His present exalted role as prophet, priest and king will likewise finish its course and all the functions fulfilled and God's plan brought to completion. I think there is great encouragement here. What is Christ doing right now? He is sitting upon His throne, applying the benefits of His finished work; overseeing all of history; driving the plan of God to its happy ending for God's people.

So there it is, this is what God has done through the resurrection of Christ. It is our place now to see this, understand it, realize the implications of it and allow our faith to be built up; our hearts to be assured; to allow the light and momentary afflictions of this age which are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us to be put in perspective; to hold fast to these truths and live in light of them.