

Chapter 17: The Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1–58

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of the most important passages in all Scripture. First, the Apostle Paul outlines the gospel message in the clearest expression anywhere in Scripture (1 Cor. 15:1–11). Second, Paul confronts directly false teaching about the resurrection that is misleading and confusing Christians in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 15:12–34). Paul is horrified that some Corinthians were teaching that there would be no resurrection from the dead (v. 12). Third, Paul explains the fullness of what the resurrection will mean, including nothing less than the exaltation of human nature from being equipped for earthly life, to being equipped for the heavenly life of full, face-to-face fellowship with God forever (1 Cor. 15:35–49). Finally, Paul celebrates the great mystery that God has revealed of the transformation that we will experience when Christ returns, with a final word of exhortation for believers to abound in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:50–58). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches that *Christ is the firstfruits of God's resurrection harvest*.

The Gospel Delivered to You (1 Cor. 15:1–11)

Paul's transition from chapter 14 to chapter 15 is abrupt. Paul quickly introduces a new subject concerning the resurrection of the dead.¹ In this case, however, Paul gives us no hints as to why Paul has taken up this issue, whether by a report or by a direct question raised from the Corinthians themselves (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:11; 7:1).² Eventually, Paul will make his particular concern clear enough, which is that some have begun to say that there is no resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12). Rather than attacking this issue directly, Paul masterfully opens his discussion of this subject by reminding the Corinthians of the basics of the gospel, since there is no indication that the Corinthians believed themselves to be out of step on this subject with Paul.³ It seems, rather, that the Corinthians have embraced the gospel without entirely realizing the implications of the gospel concerning the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.⁴

If so, then Paul's statement, "I would remind you," or, more literally, "I make known to you," may be a "gentle rebuke."⁵ Paul is returning to teach the ABCs of the gospel to people who believe themselves to be ready for spiritual graduate school. With bitter irony, this word "make known" (γνωρίζω, *gnōrizō*) is the opposite of what Paul wrote two verses earlier in 1 Corinthians 14:38: "If anyone *does not recognize this* [lit., "is unknowing"; ἀγνοεῖ, *agnoei*], he *is not recognized* [lit., "is not

¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 311.

² Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 335.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 625.

⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 683.

⁵ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 197.

known”; ἀγνοεῖται, *agnoeitai*].”⁶ The Corinthians believe themselves to be advanced, but because they do not *know* these basic facts, they will not be *known* by God unless they correct their thinking.⁷ So, Paul offers a remedial education on the gospel to these proud, but confused, Corinthians.

The first two verses contain one long sentence that is saturated by the word “gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, *to euangelion*).⁸ While there are multiple words that Paul could have chosen to describe the act of *preaching*, he twice uses the word for “preaching the gospel” (εὐηγγελισάμην, *euēngelisamēn*; v. 1, 2). In Greek, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that he “gospelled the gospel” to them. In other words, Paul is saying that he went to great lengths to teach them the gospel, so that there should be no confusion whatsoever about what the gospel implies about the resurrection of the dead.

The Response to the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1b–2a)

Next, Paul goes a step beyond what *he* did by preaching the gospel to them, to talk about their threefold response to the gospel: “which also you received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved” (v. 1b–2a; my translation).⁹ First, then, Paul says that the Corinthians *received* the gospel. Paul used this same word earlier in 1 Corinthians 11:23 to describe how *he* had received the tradition about the Lord’s Supper, and then delivered on that tradition to the Corinthians. Paul will use these words for receiving and delivering the tradition of the gospel in v. 3: “For I *delivered* to you as of first importance what I also *received*...”¹⁰ This suggests, then, that Paul is not giving a general summary of the gospel in v. 3–4, but a more formal confession of faith used in the early church.¹¹

Second, Paul says that the Corinthians *stand* in this gospel. That is, the church *exists by means* of the gospel, *standing* in the gospel, so that the church would *fall* without the gospel.¹² Even the perfect tense of the verb (i.e., “in which you have stood”) points to a previously established fact, with ongoing implications: “Standing means established and continuing firm in faith as a tree stands when it is well rooted.”¹³ Not only did the Corinthians *receive* the gospel in the beginning, but their ongoing existence as a church depends on continuing to *stand* in that gospel.

Third, Paul says that the Corinthians *are being saved* by this gospel. This verb is expressed in the present tense, describing ongoing, incomplete action. In terms of our justification, we have already, once-for-all been pardoned of our sins, accepted by God, and counted as righteous in God’s sight by

⁶ Our word “agnostic,” meaning one who does not know (usually used in reference to ignorance about the existence of God), comes from this word.

⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 799.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 626.

⁹ The ESV does not translate the threefold repetition of the word καί (*kai*), meaning “and” or “also.” This is not necessarily wrong, since Greek uses the word καί in ways that are often redundant in English. Nevertheless, I have put back the word “also” in this translation to see that each of these elements forms a link in a chain of response to the gospel. (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 336.)

¹⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 682.

¹¹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 254–55.

¹² Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 268.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 626.

the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us by faith.¹⁴ So, for those who have trusted Christ by faith, our justification is complete and final. Justification, however, is not the totality of our salvation, but only the foundation of it. So, while our justification is final, God continues to work out "all other saving graces" of transforming and conforming us into the likeness and image of Christ by the process of sanctification.¹⁵ While Christ has already saved us to the uttermost from the *condemnation* of our sin by justification, the present tense that Paul uses here expresses the ongoing work of God to save us to the uttermost from the *corruption* of our sin by sanctification (cf. Heb. 7:25).

The Warnings of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:2b)

In light of this great work of the gospel in Corinth, Paul issues two warnings to keep the Corinthians on track: "...if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (v. 2b). First, there is a warning about holding fast, and, second, a warning about believing in vain. The word *holding fast* means "to adhere firmly to traditions, convictions, or beliefs."¹⁶ Elsewhere, this word *in vain* may either mean *without cause* (cf. Col. 2:18) or *without effect* (Gal. 3:4; 4:11).¹⁷ If Paul means *without cause*, then the warning against believing *in vain* "suggests a hasty, ill-thought-out, belief commitment."¹⁸ If, however, Paul means *without effect*, then Paul would be talking about worthlessness of their faith if there is no resurrection of the dead (cf. v. 16–19). Together, Paul is warning them to "adhere firmly" to the gospel, because the gospel is *not* "without effect." Or, put positively, Paul is urging the Corinthians to persevere in their faith because of the reliability of the gospel promises that the dead will indeed be raised up with Christ. As David Garland writes, "While graveyards may remind one of the brevity of life, the resurrection ensures the brevity of death."¹⁹

Delivered and Received, as of First Importance (1 Cor. 15:3a)

As we mentioned earlier, the language of *delivering* and *receiving* in v. 3a are the words of faithfully handing on a tradition. That is, Paul is asserting that he is faithfully handing on to the Corinthians the firsthand accounts of what those who were present at the death, burial, and

¹⁴ Q. 70. What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone. (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #70)

¹⁵ Q. 75. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life. (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #75)

¹⁶ κατέχω, in *BDAG*, 3rd ed., 533.

¹⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

¹⁸ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 256.

¹⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 681.

resurrection of Jesus personally witnessed. We should note, though, that Paul makes a slightly different point elsewhere about how he received the gospel: “For I did not receive it [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). How do these statements fit together? Since Paul uses the same word for “receive” in Galatians 1:12, some argue that we must interpret 1 Corinthians 15:3a to mean that Paul is talking about receiving the gospel from Jesus Christ.²⁰

It is better, though, to recognize that Paul is primarily emphasizing the *historical facts* of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 (as we will see in v. 3b–8), while he is primarily emphasizing the *doctrine*, or the *interpretation of those facts*, in Galatians 1.²¹ Paul was not an eyewitness observer of the facts, so he was dependent on others to receive their testimony of what took place. Indeed, Paul identifies a number of eyewitnesses in v. 5–7. On the other hand, Paul received an explanation of the significance of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ from none other than Christ himself. These two observations perhaps explain part of the reason why Paul did not write one of the Gospels, but why Paul instead writes the majority of the doctrinal teaching of the New Testament.

Paul says that what he received he also delivered to the Corinthians “as of first importance.” While the word “importance” does not appear in 1 Corinthians 15:3, the ESV’s addition of the word clarifies exactly the meaning of the Greek phrase “in the first” as describing the “principal things” of the gospel.²² What are these “principal things” that Paul stresses to us: the historical facts of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, in accordance with the Scriptures.

Historical Facts and their Enduring Significance (1 Cor. 15:3b–4)

In what follows, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he had taught them, “as of first importance,” about the gospel. Each of the statements from v. 3b–5 are linked by the word “and,” demonstrating that these details stand together as a unified gospel message.²³ Here, Paul gives a basic summary of the facts of the gospel, and the significance of those facts, in what amounts to one of the earliest creedal statements.²⁴ So, Paul begins with a basic fact: “Christ died...” (v. 3b). Then, Paul explains the significance of this event: “Christ died *for our sins*...” Christ did not merely die, but his death had a purpose, “that by taking our curse upon him he might redeem us from it. For what else was Christ’s death, but a sacrifice for expiating our sins — what but a satisfactory penalty, by which we might be reconciled to God — what but the condemnation of one, for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness for us?”²⁵ This is the doctrine of *substitutionary atonement*, that Christ died in our place, condemned for our sins, so that he might endure God’s wrath in our behalf, and so that we might be

²⁰ e.g., Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

²¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 683–84.

²² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

²³ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 338.

²⁴ “Creeds perform a double role both as *declarations of a theological content* and as *self-involving personal commitments*, like nailing up one’s colors (see Neufeld, *Earliest Christian Confessions*). As an article of faith this very early creed ranks as *first and foremost*: it has first importance.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 256.)

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

forgiven.

In addition to this doctrine about the significance of Christ's death, Paul adds one more point: "Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures...*" Not only did Christ die, and not only did Christ die for our sins, but his atoning, sacrificial death for us was foretold by the Old Testament Scriptures. Although there are specific passages of the Old Testament where Christ's death is foretold with particular clarity (e.g., Ps. 22; Isa. 53), the Old Testament is brimming with promises, types, and shadows that the Christ must suffer and die for the sins of his people (e.g., Gen. 3:15; 15:17; 22:1–19; 37:32; Ex. 12:1–50; Lev. 1; 16; etc.). Thus, the New Testament everywhere teaches that Christ's death was predicted in the Old Testament.²⁶

In v. 4, Paul tells us that Christ "was buried." There are probably two reasons for mentioning explicitly that Christ was buried. First, the burial of Christ "functions to verify the reality of the death. In the present context it emphasizes the fact that a dead corpse was laid in the grave, so that the resurrection that follows will be recognized as an objective reality, not merely a 'spiritual' phenomenon, a phantasm of some kind."²⁷ Secondly, the tomb in which Christ was buried also functions as the backdrop to the resurrection. The first announcement of Christ's resurrection happened not in the place where the disciples were staying, but in the tomb where Christ's lifeless body had lain (e.g., Luke 24:1–12).

Next, Paul states that Christ "was raised on the third day...." To die and to be buried is the fate of all humankind; however, Christ's death was unique in that he was raised back to life from the dead. The grammar of the first two verbs, "died" and "was buried," described completed actions (aorist), but this verb, "was raised," describes a completed action with ongoing effects (perfect).²⁸ While Christ *did* truly die, and he *was* truly buried, he does not remain so. By contrast, Christ remains *raised up* from the dead even now, and forever into the future.²⁹ The passive nature of the verb "was raised" points to the *Father's* role in raising his Son from the dead; however, this point

²⁶ "That the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice was predicted by the law and the prophets is the constant doctrine of the New Testament. Our Lord reproved his disciples for not believing what the prophets had spoken on this subject, Luke 24 25. 26. Paul protested before Festus, that in preaching the gospel he had said 'none other things than those which Moses and the prophets say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles,' Acts 26, 22. 23. He assured the Romans that his gospel was 'witnessed (to) by the law and the prophets,' Rom. 3. 21. The epistle to the Hebrews is an exposition of the whole Mosaic service as a prefiguration of the office and work of Christ. And the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is the foundation of all the New Testament exhibitions of a suffering and atoning Messiah. Paul and all other faithful ministers of the gospel, therefore, teach that atonement for sin, by the death of Christ, is the great doctrine of the whole word of God." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312–13.)

²⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 805.

²⁸ The third clause is expressed with a different tense of the verb: *and that..he was raised* (ἐγήγερται, perfect). In contrast with *died* (ἀπέθανεν), and *was buried* (ἐτάφη), both of which are aorist tenses, the new clause suggests both that the raising happened, and that it remains in force. Christ died, but he is not dead; he was buried, but he is not in the grave; he was raised, and he is alive now...." (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 340.)

²⁹ "Thus [perfect tense of *was raised*], the confessional formula does not just narrate past events: It proclaims Christ as risen Lord." (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 257.)

should not be stressed too far. The Bible teaches that all three persons of the Trinity were involved in raising up Christ from the dead: God the Father (Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15; Gal. 1:1; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10), the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11), and even the Son himself (John 10:17–18).³⁰ Furthermore, this was not a mere resuscitation after a brief pause of his heartbeat, but a resurrection that took place much later, “on the third day,” when no human measures for restoring life would be possible.

As with the death of Christ for our sins, Paul adds the phrase, “in accordance with the Scriptures” to describe the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Where, though, do the Scriptures teach that the Christ would rise from the dead? Most frequently, the apostles pointed to Psalm 16:10 and Psalm 110:1 as texts that foretold the resurrection of the Messiah (cf. Acts 2:25–36).³¹ Beyond these clear statements, the New Testament writers saw the sparing of Isaac as a foreshadowing of the resurrection (e.g., Heb. 11:19), perhaps even so far as noting the reference to “the third day” in Genesis 22:4.³² Also, the story of Joseph’s “death” at the hands of his brothers eventually led to his exaltation to the right hand of Pharaoh was widely recognized as a foreshadowing of the messiah (Gen. 37:32; 41:40).³³ Jesus himself compared Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish to his the three days and three nights that he would spend in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40; cf. Jon. 1:17). A few other Old Testament texts also speak of God’s deliverance from death and destruction “on the third day” (2 Kgs. 20:5; Hos. 6:2).³⁴ Rather than identifying any one text, Paul seems to be pointing to the *collective* witness of *all* these texts from the Old Testament as pointing forward to the resurrection of Christ on the third day, “in accordance with the Scriptures.”

Christ’s Post-Resurrection Appearances (1 Cor. 15:5–7)

The final element of historical facts has less to do with an *accomplishment* of Christ, and more to do with the *proof* of what Christ had accomplished: Christ *appeared* (or, “was seen”) by hundreds of people after his resurrection from the dead (v. 5–8). Paul is not merely asserting that Christ was raised from the dead; he is appealing to the testimony of a great number of witnesses who can verify

³⁰ *Contra* Thiselton, who insists that “Only in John does Jesus speak of his hypothetical power to raise himself, but even in John he does not suggest that this will be the efficient cause of the resurrection event (cf. John 6:39, 40, 54)...Further, if this were otherwise, our comments above concerning the experience of death as ‘nothingness,’ a yielding of the self into the hands of God alone, would not apply to the death of Jesus Christ. But patently this *was* the character of Christ’s death. Resurrection springs from God’s promise, God’s power, God’s act of re-creation, and God’s grace—and this alone.” (Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 258.) Thiselton overlooks John 10:17–18, where Jesus states that *he* will raise up his own life after laying it down. More seriously, Thiselton seems to overlook the fact that Jesus Christ is human *and* God. *God*, in a unified act of the Father, the Holy Spirit, *and* the Son, raised up Jesus Christ from the dead.

³¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 807.

³² Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 304.

³³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2014), 37, 43, 57. For more on this point, see my meditation on Genesis 41 here: <https://freedailybiblestudy.com/february-8th-bible-meditation-genesis-41/>

³⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 807.

the facts.³⁵

Without explaining why, Paul omits any reference to the women who first saw the resurrected Christ at the tomb (c.f., Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1–11; John 20:1–18).³⁶ In verse 5, Paul goes straight to the appearances of Jesus to Peter, and then to “the twelve.” By “the twelve,” Jesus clearly means the disciples, even though one of those twelve had already died by suicide (Matt. 27:3–10).³⁷ Verse 6 is particularly intriguing, since Paul speaks of an event when Christ appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time.

The New Testament does not explicitly record such an event; however, a good case may perhaps be made that this event took place in Galilee, at the giving of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:10, 16–20).³⁸ While Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in Jerusalem as they awaited the giving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4), Jesus also commanded the disciples to meet him at some point in Galilee (Mark 14:28). If there were only 120 believers in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15), the other 380+ witnesses were perhaps already in Galilee. The wide open spaces of Galilee would have made a meeting with the Lord easier than trying to meet with 500 in the confines of Jerusalem. Still, we must acknowledge that this is a speculative guess, since the New Testament does not tell us when and where this event took place. At the time he wrote this, most of these witnesses were still alive, although even by that time some had died (v. 6). Paul, however, does not describe them as “dead,” but merely as having “fallen asleep.” Like the death of Christ, their deaths will not be permanent, but only a time of sleep until Christ returns to awaken them from the dead.³⁹ Their testimony lives on in this letter as one of the strongest documented proofs of the resurrection of Christ that we have to this day.

In v. 7, Paul mentions an appearance to “James,” which may refer to James the Apostle, the brother of John, but, more likely, probably refers to James the brother of Jesus, a leader in the church Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19).⁴⁰ The phrase “all the apostles” in v. 7 probably includes “the twelve,” but probably also refers to a larger group of apostles beyond those original twelve (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Thess. 2:6 (cf. 1:1)).⁴¹ The resurrected Christ appeared to a great number of reliable witnesses.

Christ’s Grace Toward Paul (1 Cor. 15:8–10)

³⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 314.

³⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

³⁷ “But as we know, that there were twelve in number that were set apart by Christ’s appointment, though one of them had been expunged from the roll, there is no absurdity in supposing that the name was retained. On this principle, there was a body of men at Rome that were called Centumviri, while they were in number 102. By the *twelve*, therefore, you are simply to understand the chosen Apostles.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 10–11. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>)

³⁸ For the following arguments, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 636–37.

³⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 689–90.

⁴⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 316.

⁴¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 638.

Last of all, Paul says that Christ appeared to him, “as to one untimely born” (v. 8). It is possible that this word refers to a premature birth, as the ESV translates it; however, it is more likely that Paul refers to himself as an abortion, or a miscarried/stillborn child. The word Paul uses (ἔκτρομα, *ektrōma*) literally means “from a wound” (from τρῶμα/τραῦμα, from which we get our word *trauma*), and refers to a child born dead, whether by a deliberate action (abortion) or without any deliberate action (miscarriage).⁴² Paul is stating that he was in this awful, pitiful, and even *dead* position when Christ appeared to him.⁴³ Paul supplies the reason for describing himself in such graphic terms in the next verse: “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (v. 9). Paul is the *least* not merely because he was the *last* chosen, but he is also least in “rank and dignity” because of his actions.⁴⁴

Christ chooses Paul, then, not *because* of Paul’s worthiness, but *in spite of* it. Thus, Paul says that “by the grace of God I am what I am” (v. 10). Paul’s call to be an apostle of Jesus comes not by his merit, but by God’s grace. Paul insists, though, that the grace of God was not (or, better, “was not found”)⁴⁵ “in vain” or “empty.” That is, God’s grace produced abundant fruit in Paul’s life, so that he worked harder than any of the others in service to the Lord. Nevertheless, Paul takes no credit for this work: “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” John Calvin well summarizes Paul’s outlook on this, writing, “Let us learn, therefore, that we have nothing that is good, but what the Lord has graciously given us, that we do nothing good but what he *worketh in us*, (Philippians 2:13) — not that we do nothing ourselves, but that we do nothing without being influenced — that is, under the guidance and impulse of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶

The Gospel Preached and Believed (1 Cor. 15:11)

Although Paul took a different path from the others to whom Christ also appeared, Paul insists that their message has been the same about the gospel of Christ: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor. 15:11). From the very first Easter Sunday all the way to the present day, Christ’s death and resurrection has been the core message of the preaching of all faithful ministers, and the core beliefs of all faithful believers.⁴⁷ Regardless of the minister, the message must remain consistent, so that the whole church may believe.

Our Resurrection Hope (1 Cor. 15:12–34)

⁴² “ἔκτρομα,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 157.

⁴³ He was tantamount to an ἔκτρομα *when* Christ appeared to him, not afterward. If he means by this that he was something embryonic and unfit for life, then his life could be sustained only by divine intervention...If he means that he was an aborted fetus or a stillborn child, which is more likely, then he is referring to his state of wretchedness as an unbeliever and persecutor of the church.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 693.)

⁴⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 317.

⁴⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 641.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 14–16. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.i.html>>

⁴⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 318.

In v. 12–19, Paul finally reveals what has prompted this discussion about the fundamental message of the gospel: some have been saying that there is no resurrection from the dead. Although many have offered suggestions for why some in Corinth may have denied the resurrection of the dead, ultimately we do not know.⁴⁸ We do know that the resurrection of the dead was a highly controversial subject, rejected by Jewish Sadducees and Greek philosophers alike (Matt. 22:23; Acts 17:32). Elsewhere, Paul warned Timothy of those who taught that the resurrection had already happened (2 Tim. 2:16–18). It is impossible, however, to say what exactly was behind the thinking of the Corinthians. The reasons behind this false teaching in Corinth, then, are less important than the damaging teaching itself. The benefit of withholding the original reasons for this denial is that we may apply Paul’s words all the more directly to those who would deny the resurrection in our day, regardless of their reasons.

Rhetorically, Paul’s structure of this whole chapter is powerful. Rather than immediately addressing his concern, Paul first reminded the Corinthians of their shared belief in the gospel. Only now does he demonstrate that the implications of their shared belief in the gospel must undercut this idea that there is no resurrection from the dead.⁴⁹ Or, to put this the other way, Paul now demonstrates that a rejection of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead will ultimately undercut their shared belief in the gospel. Paul’s argument is simple: if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then he and the other apostles have preached a false gospel. If they have preached a false gospel, then the Corinthians have believed in a lie that leaves them without a shred of hope for this life or the next.

To make this case, Paul first carefully connects his preaching about the specific resurrection of Christ with the necessity of the general resurrection of the dead. As before, Paul speaks of Christ’s being “raised” with a passive verb, reflecting that Christ was raised up by the power of God.⁵⁰ Also, while the ESV uses a different word for “preach” in v. 11 and “proclaimed” in v. 12, Paul connects the previous section with this new section by using the same Greek word in both verses.⁵¹ In these elements, Paul is restating exactly the point he made earlier.

⁴⁸ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 202.

⁴⁹ “The structure of Paul’s argument in this chapter is one of the most striking examples of Paul’s use of forms and conventions familiar to Greco-Roman rhetoric. The first section (vv. 1–11) stated a major premise or basic case (Latin *narratio*). Normally this set out common, shared, beliefs or assumptions on which the rest of the argument could be based. This next middle section (vv. 12–34) embodies what rhetoricians called a *refutatio* (the reasons why a denial of the argument leads to unacceptable consequences, vv. 12–19) and a *confirmatio* (a reaffirmation of the logical alternative and its implications, vv. 20–34). Paul begins with the *refutatio*.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 264.)

⁵⁰ “The passive voice implies that God is the agent who raised Christ. The Scriptures make both statements: that God raised Christ, Rom. 6:4; 8:11; Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 26:32; and that Christ himself arose, Mark 9:21 [*sic*; 9:31?]; Luke 18:33. In both expressions the act is due to the divine power which is Christ’s [page 648] equally with the Father. Jesus has power to lay down his life and to take it back again, John 10:18. The apostle properly uses the passive here and makes God the agent because of the parallel which he has in mind regarding our resurrection, which is the work of God.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 647–48.)

⁵¹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 258–59.

Subtly, however, Paul expands on what he said earlier about the nature of Christ's resurrection by stating that Christ is proclaimed as raised "from the dead" (v. 12). Earlier in v. 4, Paul only stated that Christ "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures," without specifying *what* Christ was raised *from*. Now, by adding the phrase "from the dead," Paul is clarifying not merely that Christ was raised from *death* in the abstract, but that he was raised from among the number of all other human beings who had died.⁵² In death, Christ became one of "the dead," until he was raised "from the dead" on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures. Therefore, a statement that the *dead* are not raised ultimately proves too much by effectively denying that even *Christ* was raised from the dead (v. 13).⁵³

In v. 14, Paul points to two consequences for denying that Christ was raised from the dead: (1) "our preaching is in vain" and (2) "your faith is in vain." Twice in a row, Paul uses the same word for "vain," meaning "empty" or "hollow," "like a nut without a kernel."⁵⁴ These two warnings—the emptiness of a resurrection-less preaching, and the emptiness of a resurrection-less faith—explains the specific focus of each of Paul's next two parts of this section, in vv. 15–16 and vv. 17–19, respectively. If Christ is not raised from the dead, then Christianity is not merely corrupted. Much worse, if Christ is not raised from the dead, then Christianity is completely false and altogether worthless.⁵⁵

Before studying Paul's warnings about false preaching and false belief, we should make one additional observation. We may perhaps remember that Paul also earlier contrasted the Corinthians of the worthlessness of eloquent speech against the power of the preaching of the cross in 1 Corinthians 2:1–4.⁵⁶ Is it possible that the Corinthians had begun to think that Paul's preaching about Christ's death and resurrection was less about the substantial truth of that proclamation, and more about the style with which the speaker presented it? Certainly, professing Christians have often attempted to evacuate Christianity of its core message and power, while holding on to its outward form. Especially during the last 150 years or so, a number of so-called Christian churches have jettisoned the doctrine of Christ's bodily resurrection, while trying to maintain Christian practices, worship, and teaching otherwise. Tragically, until Christ returns, the church will face perennial temptations to put faith in a cross-less and resurrection-less Christianity. We must not be deceived by such a false gospel, however. Such a Christianity will never be anything more than vain emptiness. Paul's message is as relevant today as it has ever been.

⁵² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 821.

⁵³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 319.

⁵⁴ "If Christ were not raised, if Christ were dead forever, both the proclamation and the faith would be 'empty,' hollow, like a nut without a kernel. All gospel preaching, every assertion and every promise which are a part of the gospel, would be a mere sound of words without reality back of them. The same would be true regarding faith or confidence that is made to rest upon such preaching. In plain language, the preaching would be a lie, and the believing would be trusting in a lie. The preachers would be like those who sell fake stocks, and the believers like those who buy fake stocks." Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 651.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 18–19. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

⁵⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 701.

Faithful Preaching (1 Cor. 15:15–16)

In v. 15, Paul draws another devastating inference from what he has just spoken.⁵⁷ If the dead are not raised (which would also mean that Christ has not been raised from the dead), then the apostles are “found” (i.e., “found *guilty*”)⁵⁸ of bearing false witness about God. What a terrible crime to commit perjury against almighty God! The English translation we have, “we testified *about* God,” is probably not as strong as what Paul is saying. The phrase Paul uses means “[down] against God,” and may refer to the idea of placing the hand *down* on something to swear an oath.⁵⁹ As apostles, God sent them to bear witness about Christ in God’s name.⁶⁰ If the dead are not raised, then they have violated their commission and abused their authority, and they would need to face God’s wrath against their lies: “For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised” (v. 16).

Powerful Faith (1 Cor. 15:17–19)

In v. 17, Paul addresses the second major problem: if Christ has not been raised, then their faith is “futile.” Earlier, Paul said that their faith would be “empty/vain” (v. 14) if Christ were not raised. Now, Paul uses a different word that means “useless,” “idle,” or “worthless.”⁶¹ It is not merely that the preaching would be false, as bad as that would be. Much more, their faith in that false belief would accomplish nothing good for them. It is not only Christ’s death, but also Christ’s *resurrection*, that is necessary for our justification and forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom. 4:25).⁶² So, if Christ is not raised, “you are still in your sins” (v. 17).

Paul sharpens the point he is making by appealing to those who had already died after believing in Christ (v. 18).⁶³ If the dead are not raised, then those who died have *perished* forever. They died

⁵⁷ Grammatically, Paul uses the word ἄρα (“then”, drawing a logical conclusion) to illuminate the consequences of denying the resurrection that the Corinthians have not yet seen. The word ἄρα appears three times in this section: v. 14, 15, 18. In v. 14, the standard Greek Lexicon *BDAG* classifies the usage as “to express result (*BDAG*, 2a; p. 127). Here in v. 15, *BDAG* classifies the usage as a “marker of an inference made on the basis of what precedes” (*BDAG*, 1, p. 127). Later, in v. 18, *BDAG* classifies the usage as “to emphasize a further result” (*BDAG*, 2a, p. 127).

⁵⁸ Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 282.

⁵⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 653.

⁶⁰ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 823.

⁶¹ “In v. 14 Paul says: your faith is κενή, ‘empty,’ hollow, without a reality on which to rest. Here he says: your faith is ματαιά, ‘useless,’ idle, it gets you nothing. Our versions use “vain to translate both synonyms which obscures the important difference....Only because faith is regarded as ‘useless’ can Paul add the next clause: ‘You are yet in your sins.’ For faith is to benefit us, bring us something, namely the greatest of all treasures, the forgiveness of sins. If it brings us nothing it is ‘useless.’ On the other hand, faith is “empty” when the Word to which it clings is untrue, unreal. Though it cling ever so firmly it grasps only an empty shadow, a delusive lie. The two ideas are clearly distinct, yet they are also closely related, for a faith that is empty and rests on empty air is for that very reason also of no use whatever.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 655.)

⁶² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 321.

⁶³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 20–21. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

believing in Christ for their salvation, but their faith was worthless. If the dead are not raised, then they have been condemned in their death forever, without hope that they will be raised up with Christ. This means more than mere annihilation, but everlasting torment.⁶⁴

It is with this threat of hopelessness in death that Paul writes v. 19: “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”⁶⁵ Without any hope of the resurrection of the resurrection of the dead, the world would be right in saying that the cross is folly (1 Cor. 1:23).⁶⁶ Beyond this, John Calvin lists three other reasons why Christians would be the most to be pitied: (1) Christians receive more of God’s loving chastisement than the rest of the world; (2) Christians do not have the pleasure of giving themselves to the benefits offered in the world (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32); and (3) Christians face the persecution of the world.⁶⁷

Christ the Firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20–22)

In v. 20, Paul makes a hard transition out of the previous section.⁶⁸ No longer does Paul consider the horrifying consequences that would follow if Christ had not been raised from the dead.⁶⁹ Now, Paul deals with the true situation, taking up a thorough examination of the consequences that follow from the reality that Christ has been raised from the dead.⁷⁰ Paul says more than merely acknowledging that Christ *rose* from the dead, saying instead that Christ *has risen* from the dead, reflecting the ongoing significance of Christ’s resurrection.⁷¹

Specifically, Paul tells us that Christ’s resurrection from the dead took place as the *firstfruits* of those who have died (“fallen asleep”). Primarily, by calling Christ’s resurrection the *firstfruits*, Paul is referring to the first portion of a harvest. The first portion harvested of a crop serves as a pledge and a guarantee of the harvest of the rest of the crop.⁷² In the previous section, Paul warned that the logical consequences of denying *our* resurrection would be to invalidate *Christ’s* resurrection. Now, Paul is

⁶⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 322.

⁶⁵ There is some debate about whether the word “only” should be associated with “in this life only,” or perhaps as “in Christ only” or “only hoped in Christ.” On the whole, the first option (“in this life only”) makes the most sense of the passage, especially in context. See Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 322–23.

⁶⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 703.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 22–23. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

⁶⁸ “*But* is adversative; far from Christians being the most to be pitied among men, the fact of the resurrection alters the whole situation.” (Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 205.)

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 24. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

⁷⁰ “*But* now, *ὡὐὐὐ δέ*, i.e. as the matter actually stands. All the gloomy consequences presented in the preceding verses follow from the assumption that Christ did not rise from the dead. But as in point of fact he did rise, these things have no place. Our preaching is not vain, your faith is not vain, ye are not in your sins, the dead in Christ have not perished, we are not more miserable than other men. The reverse of all this is true.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 323.)

⁷¹ “Not only did Christ rise on a certain day in history, but he continues permanently in his character as the risen Lord.” (Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 205.)

⁷² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 829.

explaining the logical consequences that move in the opposite direction: if Christ *has* been raised, then we too *must* be raised up with him.⁷³ In both cases, Paul takes for granted that the hope of our resurrection depends on, and is guaranteed by, Christ's resurrection. If the one, then the other. If *not* the one, then *not* the other.

Biblically, the Old Testament prescribed a feast to celebrate the first gathering of the crops, called the Feast of Firstfruits, which we read about in Leviticus 23:9–14.⁷⁴ The Israelites were not permitted to eat of their harvest until they had brought the first portion to the Lord as an offering to him at the Feast of Firstfruits. By consecrating the firstfruits of their harvest to the Lord, they were celebrating the Lord's provision, and they were expressing their dependence upon him to provide the rest of their crop as a harvest. Thus, part of Paul's point is to use the celebration and faith about the harvest that was expressed each year at the Feast of Firstfruits to demonstrate our joy and hope about the resurrection of Christ as it points forward to our own resurrection. *We* are the harvest that will be reaped with Christ when he raises us from the dead.

We must recognize, however, that Paul is not making this connection haphazardly. Our Lord was raised from the dead *on* the day of the Feast of Firstfruits. Christ was crucified during the Passover Feast, and the Feast of Firstfruits was to take place immediately following Passover, “on the day after the Sabbath” (Lev. 23:11)—that is, on the Sunday following Passover. Just as our Lord was crucified during the Feast of Passover as our ultimate Passover sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7), so our Lord was raised from the dead during the Feast of Firstfruits as our ultimate firstfruits from the dead. This was the great purpose of the Jewish ceremonial law, in that the feasts pointed forward to Christ's work. Christ is our firstfruits from the dead.

In v. 21, Paul goes on to explain the causal connection between Christ's resurrection and our resurrection.⁷⁵ Christ did not rise for himself, individually and alone, any more than Adam died for himself, individually and alone.⁷⁶ On the contrary, it was *through a man* that death came into the world. That is, it was a man who *caused* death for the rest of humankind. In the same way, Paul insists, it is *through a man* (or, by the *cause* of a *man*) that will also come the resurrection of the dead. Just as the whole human race is born into sin by their solidarity with Adam, so also believers will be

⁷³ “The apostle does not mean merely that the resurrection of Christ was to precede that of his people; but as the first sheaf of the harvest presented to God as a thank-offering, was the pledge and assurance of the ingathering of the whole harvest, so the resurrection of Christ is a pledge and proof of the resurrection of his people. In Rom. 8, 23 and 11, 16, the word ἀπαρχή, first-fruits, has the same force. Comp. also Col. 1, 18 where Christ is called ‘the first begotten from the dead,’ and Rev. 1, 5. Of the great harvest of glorified bodies which our earth is to yield Christ is the first-fruits. As he rose, *so* all his people must; as certainly and as gloriously, Phil. 3, 21. The nature of this causal connection between the resurrection of Christ and that of his people, is explained in the following verses.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 323–24.)

⁷⁴ For this paragraph and the next, see Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 231–33.

⁷⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 25. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

resurrected from the dead by their solidarity with Christ.⁷⁷ In the original Greek, the words *came/has come* do not appear, for a much terser statement: “For since through man, death, also through man, resurrection from the dead” (1 Cor. 15:21; my translation). The cause of death and the cause of resurrection from the dead are in exact parallel.⁷⁸

Then, in v. 22, Paul explains the connection further. Paul states that the curse we received through Adam, and the blessing we receive through Christ, comes by virtue of being *in* Adam and *in* Christ, respectively. This points to a union that we have with Adam or with Christ, as they function as our representatives, and as we partake of their natures.⁷⁹ Where Paul used the preposition *by/through* (διά; *dia*) in v. 21 to represent Adam and Christ as a *medium* of bringing blessings and curses to us, Paul now uses the preposition *in* (ἐν; *en*) in v. 22 to represent Adam and Christ as *spheres*.⁸⁰ Those who exist in the *sphere* of Adam die, while those who exist in the *sphere* of Christ will be made alive by being resurrected from the dead. While all human beings do die because of their original connection with Adam, Paul does not mean to suggest that every human being universally will be made alive through Christ. As Hodge writes, “It is not absolutely all who die through Adam, but those only who were in him; so it is not absolutely all who live through Christ, but those only who are in him.”⁸¹ Since Christ was not born “by ordinary generation,” he was not born *in Adam*, so he did not inherit Adam’s curse by nature.⁸² Instead, he took upon himself Adam’s curse voluntarily, to make atonement as an innocent sacrifice, so that all who are *in Christ* by faith may inherit Christ’s blessing and promise of resurrection.⁸³

Christ the Conquering King (1 Cor. 15:23–26)

If Christ is indeed the firstfruits of God’s resurrection harvest, then another question arises: why

⁷⁷ “Second, since the resurrection of Christ is not an isolated event but carries with it the pledge of the future resurrection of believers, the terms **in Adam** and **in Christ** (v. 22) reflect the theological reality of *corporate solidarity*. ‘Solidarity’ was more difficult to explain to a culture of modern Western individualism before the media made sports such an all-pervasive phenomenon in life, and before trade unions took over the term to denote ‘one for all’ and ‘all for one.’ If a team member scores a goal, or contrariwise incurs a penalty, the whole team is credited with the gain or made liable for the loss incurred by an individual on the team. In Rom. 5:12–21 Paul explains that we cannot have one (the advantage) without the other (the liability). Yet ‘the result of one trespass’ differs in effect and scope from ‘the result of one act of righteousness’ (5:17) in that ‘*how much more* did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, over flow to the man’ (5:14, NIV).” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 269.)

⁷⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 663.

⁷⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324–25.

⁸⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 664.

⁸¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324–26.

⁸² “The covenant [of works] being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #22)

⁸³ “The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #31)

hasn't God not brought in the rest of his harvest yet?⁸⁴ In v. 23, Paul answers that each part of the harvest must come in its own order. Christ, the firstfruits, has risen from the dead already, while “those who belong to Christ” will not arise until Christ’s “coming.” In this verse, Paul carries forward his agricultural metaphor of Christ as the firstfruits, while also shifting to a military metaphor to give further explanation to God’s purposes and plans for this two-staged resurrection.⁸⁵ The word “order” in v. 23 describes a “rank” or “band” of soldiers, depicting the entirety of those raised from the dead as one army who are “divided into different cohorts or companies; first Christ, then his people....”⁸⁶ Christ, the captain of the Lord’s army (cf. Josh. 5:14; Heb. 2:10), arises first in the assault against Death, with the next rank of Christ’s people arising on the last day as the final invasion against Death’s power.⁸⁷ This great military operation will take place at Christ’s “coming,” a word used frequently in the New Testament to talk about Christ’s return (e.g., Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8, 9; Jas. 5:7, 8; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28).⁸⁸ This military metaphor of a two-stage assault clearly parallels the metaphor of a two-stage harvest, Christ first, and then the rest of his people with him.⁸⁹

“Then,” Paul explains, “comes the end” (v. 24). Reflecting on the fast-paced writing of this section, commentators have differed widely in their explanations of when “then” is, and what “the end” is.⁹⁰ Will “then” come immediately at Christ’s “coming” (v. 23), or after some kind of millennial reign on the earth (cf. Rev. 20:3)? Does this describe the “end” of the resurrection, or of Christ’s redemptive work, or of time itself? In context, “then” seems most likely to refer to Christ’s coming. If Paul intended to teach that Christ would reign another thousand years on the earth *after* his coming, but *before* delivering his kingdom to the Father, it would be exceedingly strange to omit any mention of that earthly reign here.⁹¹ As for “the end,” Paul seems to clarify exactly what he means: “the end” is the time “when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” (v. 24). Taken together, Paul is laying out the following sequence: (1) Christ was raised as the firstfruits, the first “order”; (2) Christ is now destroying every rule and every authority and power; (3) Christ’s “coming” will take place after he completes this work; (4) at Christ’s “coming,” those who belong to Christ will rise as the remainder of the harvest, the second “order”; (5) once the rest are raised from the dead, Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. The “coming” of Christ represents the end of Christ’s redemptive mission, where there will be nothing left for Christ to do but to raise his people from the dead and to deliver the kingdom to God

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 25–26. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

⁸⁵ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 264.

⁸⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 326.

⁸⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 708.

⁸⁸ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 313.

⁸⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 708.

⁹⁰ For a thorough evaluation of the various positions that have been put forth, see Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 326–31.

⁹¹ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 356.

the Father.⁹²

Importantly, the word translated as “destroy” (v. 24, 26) in the ESV does not refer to the annihilation of these powers, but simply to “destroy” them by “abolishing,” “rendering null and void” or “making inoperative.”⁹³ Certainly, Paul means to teach that Christ will abolish the “every rule and every authority and power” set up in explicit opposition to his reign.⁹⁴ Paul, however, does not describe only hostile, rebellious sources of authority in this world; he says that Christ will abolish *every* rule and *every* authority and power. Although worldly powers and authorities can and do become rebellious against God, we should remember that Paul teaches elsewhere that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). With this in mind, Paul seems to have a much broader vision for the abolition of these worldly powers and authority. Much as the sun and moon will no longer be needed for light in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:23), so human institutions will no longer be needed to mediate God’s authority temporally.⁹⁵

Paul defines “kingdom” that Christ delivers to the Father (v. 24) in the following verse: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (v. 25). As R. C. H. Lenski writes, “This kingdom denotes, not the church or the persons of the saints, but the rule of Christ, the King. His kingdom here on earth is found wherever he rules with his grace and his gifts.”⁹⁶ The kingdom is the place where God’s will is done on earth with the same readiness and joy as God’s will is done on

⁹² “The second question to be considered is, When is the end of the world to take place? According to some, at Christ’s coming; according to others, at an indefinite period after his second coming. It may be admitted that this verse is not decisive on this point. It marks the succession of certain events, but determines nothing as to the interval between them First, Christ’s resurrection; then the resurrection of his people; then the end of the world. But as it is said that those who are Christ’s shall rise at his coming, and then cometh the end; the natural impression is that nothing remains to be done after the resurrection before the end comes.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 329.)

⁹³ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 207.

⁹⁴ “The terms ‘rule’ (*archē*), ‘authority’ (*exousia*), and ‘power’ (*dynamis*) refer in the first instance to cosmic spheres or forces arrayed in opposition to God (cf. Rom. 8:38; Col. 1:16, 2:10–15; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12), but they also have concrete political implications. The idea that Christ is Lord and that the kingdom ultimately belongs to God the Father stands as a frontal challenge to the ideology of imperial Rome (Witherington, 295–98).” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 265.)

⁹⁵ “Some understand this as referring to the powers that are opposed to Christ himself; for they have an eye to what immediately follows, *until he shall have put all his enemies, etc.* This clause, however, corresponds with what goes before, when he said, that Christ would not sooner *deliver up the kingdom*. Hence there is no reason why we should restrict in such a manner the statement before us. I explain it, accordingly, in a general way, and understand by it — all powers that are lawful and *ordained by God*. (Romans 13:1.) In the *first* place, what we find in the Prophets (Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7) as to the darkening of the sun and moon, that God alone may shine forth, while it has begun to be fulfilled under the reign of Christ, will, nevertheless, not be fully accomplished until the last day; but then *every height shall be brought low*, (Luke 3:5,) that the glory of God may alone shine forth. Farther, we know that all earthly principalities and honors are connected exclusively with the keeping up of the present life, and, consequently, are a part of the world. Hence it follows that they are temporary.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 27. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>)

⁹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 674.

heaven (cf. Matt. 6:10). Christ must reign, then, until he brings his conquering will to bear on all people, both his people who love him and his enemies who hate him alike.

Importantly, Paul alludes to Psalm 110:1 in v. 25: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”⁹⁷ In Psalm 110, Yahweh says that *he* will put the Messiah’s enemies under his feet. As Paul applies this prophecy to Christ’s reign at the right hand of the Father, the plain reading of v. 25 is that it is *Christ* who is putting the enemies under *his own* feet.⁹⁸ There is no contradiction or conflict in these two statements, for the Scriptures teach that the three persons of the Trinity work distinctly, but indivisibly.⁹⁹ So, just as the Father created *through* the Son and *by* the Holy Spirit, so the Father is putting Christ’s enemies under his feet *through* Christ’s kingly reign, and *by* the power of the Holy Spirit in the world.¹⁰⁰

The last enemy that Christ will abolish will be Death itself (v. 26). Here, Paul personifies Death, especially by adding the definite article (“the death”), portraying Death as the long-standing archnemesis of God in this world.¹⁰¹ The means of “abolishing” or “rendering null and void” Death’s power in this world is the resurrection itself. By the resurrection, Death will lose its hold on Christ’s people forever, never to trouble them again. Right now, believers have already experienced this destruction of death in part, but not in its entirety.¹⁰² So, while our bodies continue to waste away from, the resurrection life of Christ is being renewed every day (2 Cor. 4:16). As with our relationship to sin, death *remains* in us as a lingering affliction, but death no longer *reigns* over us as a tyrant (cf. Rom. 6:12). Christ’s reign breaks into the lives of believers now, promising that he will bring us the fullness of his resurrection life when he comes again. Then, when he returns, Christ will bring his great rescue mission to its completion by raising his people from the dead, abolishing Death’s power forever.

Christ the Subjected Mediator (1 Cor. 15:27–28)

In v. 27, Paul quotes Psalm 8:6: he “has put all things in subjection under his feet.” In Psalm 8, David marvels at God’s grace to give human beings dominion over the earth at the beginning of creation (cf. Gen. 1:28–29). As Paul has just reminded us, however, Adam forfeited this dominion by his sin, so that he and all his descendants received death as the punishment for his sin (v. 21–22). As

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 28. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

⁹⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 837.

⁹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 675.

¹⁰⁰ “The two modes of representation are perfectly consistent. The Father created the world, though he did it through the Son, Heb. 1, 3. The work, therefore, is sometimes ascribed to the one and sometimes to the other. In like manner the Father subdues the powers of darkness, but it is through Christ to whom all power in heaven and earth has been committed. It is therefore equally proper to say that God makes the enemies of Christ his footstool, and that Christ himself puts his enemies under his feet.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 331.)

¹⁰¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 678–79.

¹⁰² For this sentence and the rest of this paragraph, see Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 29. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

in a parallel passage in Hebrews 2:5–8, Paul here explains that the dominion of humankind over creation described in Psalm 8 has been fulfilled in Christ, the “last Adam” (cf. vv. 45–46).¹⁰³

To this statement about the rule of a new Man over creation, Paul adds a key qualification: “it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him” (v. 27b). As *God’s* vice-regents and the administrators of *God’s* reign over creation, God never intended for human beings to reign over *him*. God intended to put all *created* things in subjection under the feet of human beings, for it would be impossible for the Creator to be ruled by his creatures. Paul’s point is subtle but critical: Christ came to become the Mediator to *reconcile* God and human beings, not to *separate* God from human beings. Christ’s reign as the God-Man Mediator, then, is only a provisional reign until the full rescue mission and assault against his enemies (including death) is complete.¹⁰⁴

At that point, “when all things are subjected to him” (v. 28), then Christ the Mediator will deliver the kingdom to the Father as his completed mission. Paul speaks of Christ as the “Son” in this verse not to say that the Son *as* the Son will be subject to the Father, for the three persons of the Godhead “are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”¹⁰⁵ Because Christ unites two whole natures of God and man into one *person*, the Scriptures commonly attribute actions or experiences proper for one nature to the other nature.¹⁰⁶ Just as Paul earlier stated that the rulers of this age “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8), so now Paul says that “the Son” must be subjected to God. In both cases, it is not that Christ can suffer or be made subject according to his *divine nature*, but rather that the Son suffers and is made subject according to his work as the God-Man, the Mediator between God and men.¹⁰⁷ Paul is not saying that Christ shall cease to rule, for, as Gabriel promised to Mary, “of [Christ’s] kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).¹⁰⁸

What Paul tells us here is simply that the *nature* of Christ’s rule will change. No longer will he reign as the God-Man, for everything necessary to rescue humanity from sin, death, and the devil will have been accomplished. From that point on, once the restoration is total, Christ will reign as God, “that God may be all in all” (v. 28). John Calvin puts this so well:

We acknowledge, it is true, God as the ruler, but it is in the face of the man Christ. But Christ will then restore the kingdom which he has received, that we may cleave wholly to

¹⁰³ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 271–72.

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 31. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

¹⁰⁵ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #6.

¹⁰⁶ “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 8.7)

¹⁰⁷ “This kingdom, which he exercises as the Theanthropos [God-Man], and which extends over all principalities and powers, he is to deliver up when the work of redemption is accomplished. He was invested with this dominion in his mediatorial character for the purpose of carrying on his work to its consummation. When that is done, i.e. when he has subdued all his enemies, then he will no longer reign over the universe as Mediator, but only as God; while his headship over his people is to continue for ever.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 330.)

¹⁰⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 674–75.

God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity, because a way of approach will then be opened up, from which our infirmity now keeps us back. Thus then Christ will be subjected to the Father, because the veil being then removed, we shall openly behold God reigning in his majesty, and Christ's humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God.¹⁰⁹

When this is complete, then we will we will enjoy “the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity.”¹¹⁰ Of Christ's kingdom there will indeed be no end; however, he will reign not alone as the God-Man, but with the Father and the Holy Spirit as *God*.

Baptism on Behalf of the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29)

Earlier in v. 12–19, Paul had traced out the horrifying consequences that *would* be true if Christ had *not* been raised from the dead. Then, in v. 20–28, Paul explained the wonderful consequences that *are* true *since* Christ *has* been raised from the dead. As one final word to give superabundant proof that Christ has been raised from the dead, Paul now adds “experiential arguments are adduced in favour of the resurrection.”¹¹¹ Paul marks this transition by the word “otherwise” in v. 29: “otherwise,” if Christ has not been raised, these various actions and experiences (which Paul goes on to list out) would make no sense.¹¹² There are roughly three sets of these actions and experiences, marked by changes in the personal prepositions: (1) what *they* do (v. 29); (2) what *I/we* do (v. 30–32); and (3) what *you* do (v. 33–34).¹¹³ Especially, Paul warns that if the church abandons right *thinking* about the resurrection of Christ, then they will also abandon right *living* in obedience to Christ.¹¹⁴

Paul begins with the most puzzling action: people who are being baptized on behalf of the dead (v. 29). Barnett rightly summarizes the confusion about this statement by observing that this is “a practice no doubt as familiar to them as it is puzzling to us.”¹¹⁵ Whatever Paul meant by this, the Corinthians must have understood it, even while we struggle to understand what this means. Most naturally, the phrase seems to describe some kind of vicarious baptism, where one (living) person was baptized on behalf of another (dead) person.¹¹⁶ There are several problems with understanding the language this way, however. First, while there are indeed records of heretical sects employing such a practice of vicarious baptism, those practices did not occur until the second century, with no hint of anything like this occurring when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.¹¹⁷ Second, and more

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 32–33. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iii.html>>

¹¹⁰ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #90.

¹¹¹ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 317.

¹¹² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 337.

¹¹³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 844.

¹¹⁴ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 266.

¹¹⁵ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 362.

¹¹⁶ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 210.

¹¹⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 846–47.

importantly, such a “magical” view of baptism’s benefits (able to be applied vicariously, for someone already dead) would not fit with Paul’s own theology of baptism. Garland rightly asks, “would he tacitly sanction (through silence) such a practice simply to score a point for his argument about the resurrection? To win one argument, he opens a Pandora’s box of new theological problems.¹¹⁸ Third, in a letter where Paul has condemned all manner of corrupted practices among the Corinthians, it is hard to believe that he would appeal to this bizarre practice without a word of condemnation against it.¹¹⁹ In all, it is unlikely that Paul refers to any kind of vicarious baptism on behalf of those who have already died. Even if that were his intention, however, we should remember that Paul does not necessarily embrace the practice, since he only speaks of what “they” do. If Paul does appeal to some practice of vicarious baptism, then Paul is appealing to the motivations behind the practice (i.e., confidence in a resurrection from the dead), and not the practice itself.¹²⁰

If the language does not refer to such a vicarious baptism, then commentators have offered a number of other options that attempt to do justice to the language, while side-stepping the problems of interpreting this as a vicarious baptism.¹²¹ Of those options, some of the more plausible suggestions would include (1) baptisms given early to catechumens (converts to Christianity who had not completed their training in the faith) who were on their deathbed;¹²² (2) baptisms performed for those who converted to Christianity after seeing loved ones profess Christ and express confidence in a coming resurrection as they approached death;¹²³ (3) a reference to the fact that we are baptized into Christ’s death, and thus *as* dead people (cf. Rom. 6:3).¹²⁴ This last option has particular appeal, since in Romans 6 Paul not only says that we were baptized into the *death* of Christ, but into his *resurrection* also. Whatever Paul is saying here in v. 29, he means to demonstrate that these baptisms are done with anticipation of our own resurrection. Ultimately, we do not know what Paul means. The important point, then, is that this practice makes no sense unless there will be a resurrection of the dead.

Danger and Death (1 Cor. 15:30–32)

In the next section, Paul steps out of the shadows of our ignorance into the clear light of what the rest of the New Testament correlates in several places: the persecution Paul has faced for the sake of the gospel. Not only throughout the book of Acts, but also in a few other points in his letters (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:23–29; Phil. 3:8–11), we read extensively of Paul’s great sufferings. As an apostle, Paul

¹¹⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 717.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 34–37. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

¹²⁰ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 209–10.

¹²¹ For summaries, see: Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 337–38; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 723–24; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 845–50; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1240–49.

¹²² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 37. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

¹²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 690. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 275.

¹²⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 717–18.

truly was in danger every hour (v. 30). In v. 31, Paul uses language associated with oath-swearing to bear witness to the depth of his suffering, where he dies “every day.” Specifically, he swears by his “pride” or “glory” or “boasting” over the Corinthians, who were the “seals of his ministry” as an apostle.¹²⁵ If anyone should know his willingness to suffer, the Corinthians should.

Why, though, would Paul be willing to go through this terrible ordeal if he were not confident of a coming resurrection from the dead? What could he possibly gain, humanly speaking, from the extensive sufferings he has endured? Paul mentions fighting with beasts in Ephesus in v. 32, and, while it is possible he means this literally, we do not read about this event anywhere else in the New Testament. Furthermore, both the writers of the Old Testament¹²⁶ and ancient secular writers would often talk about clashes with *human* enemies in terms of battling with vicious beasts.¹²⁷ Therefore, it is likely that Paul is speaking metaphorically here about the great suffering he endured at the hands of human beings rather than animals. In English, we might paraphrase this by saying that Paul was “tossed to the wolves.”

Paul’s point, though, is not to underscore the suffering itself. Paul’s point is to ask *why* he would endure such suffering if there were no resurrection from the dead. He remarks, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (v. 32; cf. Isa. 22:13). If there is no hope for a life in the *future*, why should we not live for as much pleasure as possible in the *present*? If Christians have no hope of a coming reward, then we lose all motivation for endurance.¹²⁸ We would truly be of all people most to be pitied (v. 19). By appealing to his own actions, Paul proves his own confidence in a coming resurrection of the dead.

Bad Thinking; Bad Living (1 Cor. 15:33–34)

After appealing to what “they” do (v. 29) and what “I/we” do (v. 30–32), Paul directs his attention to “you” by imperatives that he gives to the Corinthians. He begins to urging them, “Do not be deceived” (v. 33). Paul is drawing the Corinthians’ attention to their *thinking*, since he believes that their thinking has been deceived. Specifically, Paul urges them not to be deceived that “bad company ruins good morals.” The word for *company* can either refer to *companionship* (people) or *conversations* (talking/thinking).¹²⁹ Earlier, Paul said that “some of you [are saying] that there is no resurrection of the dead” (v. 12). Now, Paul is urging them not to be deceived by these people, or what they are saying.

Paul’s point here is that our *thinking* is not necessarily innocent. John Calvin wisely writes this pastoral counsel: “Now it is a sentiment that is particularly worthy of attention, for Satan, when he cannot make a direct assault upon us, deludes us under this pretext, that there is nothing wrong in our raising any kind of disputation with a view to the investigation of truth. Here, therefore, Paul in

¹²⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 339.

¹²⁶ “In the Old Testament adversaries are depicted as fierce animals wanting to tear God’s people to pieces (Pss 22:12–13; 35:17; 57:4; 58:6; Isa. 5:29; Jer. 2:15); thus Paul’s opponents are depicted metaphorically as ravaging and ferocious animals (cf. 2 Tim. 4:16–17).” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 318.)

¹²⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 339–40.

¹²⁸ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 366–67.

¹²⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856.

opposition to this, warns us that we must guard against *evil communications*, as we would against the most deadly poison, *because*, insinuating themselves secretly into our minds, they straightway corrupt our whole life.”¹³⁰ Not all doubts about the Christian faith, then, are generated by honest intellectual questions, for many intellectual doubts arise merely from a corrupted desire to free ourselves of Christianity so that we can live according to the patterns of the world.¹³¹ Our thinking affects our desires, and our desires affect our thinking. If we *want* something to be true, our desires work to reshape our *minds* to rationalize and justify our pursuit of sin.

Paul suggests that this kind of corrupted thinking makes our reasoning inebriated, intoxicated, and impaired. So, he tells us to “wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning” (v. 34). When our minds are not fixed out what is “right,” then our rationality becomes a tool of the enemy to lead us into sin.¹³² We believe that we are thinking clearly and rationally, but we are not. What is the “right” that should anchor our thinking? The Scriptures teach in several places that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (e.g., Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that those who deny God are “fools” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). Paul warns the Corinthians, though, that “some have no knowledge of God” (v. 34). Apparently, these people who are ignorant of God, and who therefore have corrupted thinking that even denies the resurrection, are leading the Corinthians astray into sin. Paul exposes this deception to the “shame” of the Corinthians, who should know better.

Our Resurrection Bodies (1 Cor. 15:35–49)

In v. 1–11, Paul reminded the Corinthian church of the centrality of the resurrection in their confession as Christians. Then, in v. 12–34, Paul refuted the false teaching circulating in Corinth that undercut that central doctrine of the resurrection of the dead—not only because this would mean that Christ had not been raised from the dead, but also because of how the resurrection is the chief hope of Christians in the life to come. Now that Paul has established the great fact of the resurrection, he moves to consider its manner.¹³³ Specifically, Paul explains the form of our future resurrection bodies.¹³⁴

Paul’s opening question puts a finger on the absurdity, humanly speaking, of the doctrine of the resurrection: “How are the dead raised?” (v. 35). This question is not about how such a thing would be possible, but about the form in which the dead will arise.¹³⁵ What would it mean to resuscitate

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 43. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

¹³¹ “We also see here that questions about and deviation from the Christian faith may stem from the moral lives of those with whom one associates. Some doubts are not generated by legitimate intellectual questions; they stem from associating with people who live in a way that is not pleasing to God.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 319.)

¹³² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 44. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.iv.html>>

¹³³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 702.

¹³⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 341.

¹³⁵ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 270.

and reanimate dead corpses.¹³⁶ In our day, there is an entire genre of horror stories about such a monstrous idea, where zombies arise from their graves, in varying states of decomposition. Why would any religion hold out such an idea as their main hope in the life to come? As Calvin writes, “There is nothing that is more at variance with human reason than this article of faith.”¹³⁷

In fact, the doctrine of the resurrection is nothing like the stories about a zombie apocalypse. Paul sharpens his line of inquiry with a second question: “With what kind of body do they come?” (v. 35). Paul does not simply ask what kind of bodies they will *have*, but more: in what form will they *come*, at Christ’s coming?¹³⁸ By this word *come*, Paul subtly ties the quality of our resurrection bodies with the resurrection body that Christ possessed when he arose from the grave.¹³⁹ We will, Paul is saying, arise at *Christ’s* coming, as the remainder of the resurrection harvest, the second wave of God’s invasion against the dominion of death. When some among the Corinthians think about the resurrection, however, they do not think of such a triumph. Instead, they can only think of rotting, decaying flesh lurching out of their graves.

Paul rebukes such senseless thinking sharply in v. 36a: “Fool!”¹⁴⁰ By “fool,” Paul is not mocking anyone’s intellectual abilities. Instead, Paul is using this word in an Old Testament sense, where a fool is someone who does not take God fully into account (cf. Ps. 14:1; 53:1).¹⁴¹ By this definition, even the most brilliant people are fools if they omit God from their calculating, theorizing, and philosophizing. Importantly, Paul just warned the Corinthians against wrong, *foolish* thinking about the resurrection with this reminder: “For some have no knowledge of God” (v. 34). As Paul will make explicit a few verses later, failure to believe the resurrection does not consider the fact that God will give those whom he resurrects a body according to his own sovereign will and choice (v. 38).¹⁴² Specifically, as Paul now addresses directly those in the “bad company” who have been ruining the Corinthians’ “good morals” (v. 33) by leading their thinking astray on the resurrection: “Fool!”

Now, Paul could have addressed the foolishness of their thinking by appealing to the unlimited power of God. After all, if God could create the world the first time, why couldn’t recreate the dead? We may not be able to understand the process, but such a thing is easy for God. Instead, Paul addresses their foolishness in a different way, by appealing to processes that with which they are quite familiar, but whose significance they have not considered.¹⁴³ Paul points to the process of how seeds grow: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (v. 36b). Jesus made the same point during his earthly ministry in John 12:24. Now, the seed does not literally die, but only symbolically, since it is buried in the earth.¹⁴⁴ Then, the seed dies in the sense as it “comes to the *end* of its own

¹³⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 46. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.v.html>>

¹³⁸ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 370.

¹³⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859.

¹⁴⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 343.

¹⁴¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 727.

¹⁴² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 863.

¹⁴³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 47. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.v.html>>

¹⁴⁴ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 320.

existence *as a seed*.”¹⁴⁵ As it grows, the outward form of the seed is fully disorganized and then entirely reorganized to take an altogether new form.¹⁴⁶

Paul is not writing a botany textbook; he is illustrating from nature the manner in which our resurrection bodies will maintain continuity with our old bodies, and yet undergo a complete transformation.¹⁴⁷ So, Paul appeals to what everyone knows: we sow a bare seed, and then a full plant of wheat or some other grain appears (v. 37). What is planted has a very different form from what grows up, and yet there is an organic continuity between the two.¹⁴⁸ Paul gets at this continuity by the phrase, “or of some other grain” (v. 37). So, a wheat seed will not produce barley, nor will a barley seed produce corn, for each plant will grow according to its kind of seed.¹⁴⁹ Thus, there is continuity from the seed to the plant, even while the plant looks vastly different from the seed.

Differences Among Earthly and Heavenly Bodies (1 Cor. 15:38–41)

In v. 38, Paul clarifies the precise link between the seed and the grows up: the will of God. In the beginning, God appointed the manner in which seed-bearing plants will produce more seeds (which will, in turn, produce more seed-bearing plants), each according to its own kind (Gen. 1:11–12).¹⁵⁰ All that we humans can do is to sow the seed (v. 37), but God is the one who gives growth as he wills (v. 38; cf. 1 Cor. 3:7).¹⁵¹ If this process of continuity and transformation, yet each in accordance with its own kind, has operated according to God’s will since the beginning, why would anyone think that God will not transform our earthly bodies into resurrected bodies according to his own will?

In v. 39, Paul takes his thought about the differences among various bodies a step further. Earlier, he gave only a passing acknowledgement that various seeds will produce either “perhaps of wheat or of some other grain” (v. 37), where the determining factor for the kind of grain that will grow is in the kind of seed that is planted. Now, Paul expands his biological focus beyond plant life to animal

¹⁴⁵ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 280.

¹⁴⁶ “Disorganization is the necessary condition of reorganization. If the seed remain a seed there is an end of it. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit, John 12, 24. The seed is as much disorganized, it as really ceases to be a seed when sown in the ground, as the body when laid in the grave. If the one dies, the other dies. Death is not annihilation, but disorganization; the passing from one form or mode of existence to another. How then can the disorganization of the body in the grave be an objection to the doctrine of a resurrection?” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 343.)

¹⁴⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859–60.

¹⁴⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 344.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 48. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.v.html>>

¹⁵⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 345.

¹⁵¹ “Note the contrast between ‘thou’ and ‘God.’ We merely do the sowing, that is all; nor can we do more. God does the rest....God is responsible for this marvel: ‘God gives it a body.’ Paul does not stop with the so-called ‘laws of nature’ or at a halfway station. He goes back to God who created all the processes of nature. This he does in beautiful harmony with the purpose of his analogy, for the resurrection of our dead bodies is also altogether an act of God’s.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 706.)

life, beginning with the greatest of the animals, the human being.

The creation narratives of Genesis illustrate that human beings are both similar and different from animals. So, human beings are created on the sixth day, the same day as other land animals, and the day after God created the animals to fill the heavens and the seas (Gen. 1:20–26). Furthermore, when the Lord sought to find a helper fit for Adam, the Lord brought animals to Adam (not plants) for him to name them. Nevertheless, while the animals are described as closer to the human beings than the plants, the narratives of Genesis affirm the fundamental, inherent differences between human beings and the animals. First, not only does God create human beings last, but he gives them dominion over all the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26–30). Second, while God creates plants and animals merely by his word, the Lord creates the human being alone by creating into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Third, while the Lord does indeed signal the general similarity between Adam and the animals by bringing all of the animals to Adam for him to name them, the narratives of Genesis also affirm the stark distinction between the two: “But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:20).

Along these lines, Paul appeals to the diversity of the created order, but he begins from the pinnacle of God’s creation: “For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish” (v. 39). It is important to recognize that Paul is not here using the term “flesh” as he sometimes does elsewhere, where “flesh” refers to our sinful nature (e.g., Rom. 7:18).¹⁵² Here, “flesh” simply means, as Thiselton puts it, “substances-used-in-creation.”¹⁵³ These may all belong to the same general class, but they are each fundamentally different. Among the creatures who live in the earth, not all flesh is the same.

In v. 40, Paul illustrates another important distinction between “bodies”: the difference between heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. While Paul could have described the sun, moon, and stars in a variety of ways (e.g., “lights”; Gen. 1:14), he explicitly chooses to continue using the term “bodies.” Here again, Paul is demonstrating similarity, while emphasizing differences. Just as the various plants grow similarly, but each to produce a different plant; and just as animals and human beings are similar, and yet they do not share the same flesh; so there God has similarly given both his heavenly and earthly creations bodies, while yet the heavenly bodies and earthly bodies have different kinds of glory. And, just as the heavenly bodies all belong to one general class, even among their ranks we can draw distinctions between the various kinds of heavenly glory for the sun, the moon, and even among each distinct star (v. 41).

In these distinctions, Paul is drawing out two points. First, Paul wants to illustrate the limitless possibilities for glory that God has already produced in the first creation.¹⁵⁴ No two stars are alike, nor is the glory of heavenly and earthly bodies the same, nor is flesh on earth the same, nor does every seed produce the same plant. The infinitely glorious God can create an infinite number of glorious forms. Thus, there is no reason to think that our resurrection bodies must take the same form as our current bodies.¹⁵⁵ Second, Paul introduces a major difference between earthly glory and heavenly glory, which he will develop in the following verses. God created Adam and Eve with a

¹⁵² Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 371.

¹⁵³ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 281.

¹⁵⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 710.

¹⁵⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 346.

true glory, but it was an *earthly* glory. The resurrection, on the other hand, will endow our bodies with a different kind of glory: a *heavenly* glory which we will inherit from the man of heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 48).

So With the Resurrection of the Dead (1 Cor. 15:42–43)

In the previous paragraph, Paul made a number of observations about the glory of old creation to illustrate the glory of new creation. Specifically, Paul observed three principles: the principle of transformation (we will be changed), the principle of continuity (yet we will remain ourselves), and the principle of promotion (by a change of rank from our current, lower earthly glory to our future, higher heavenly glory). In that paragraph, Paul focused exclusively on how things work in old creation, dealing only in extended metaphors. There, the comparisons were implied, but now, in v. 42–49, Paul makes the comparisons explicit, beginning with the transition sentence: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead” (v. 42a).

From the outset, we need to keep one key principle in focus: Paul is not contrasting *fallen* old creation against the new creation, but the *original* old creation, before the Fall, against the final form of the new creation. Paul does not make this principle explicit until v. 45–49, when Paul contrasts Adam against Christ. In v. 45, though, Paul writes “thus” (or, “so”), the same word Paul uses in v. 42. In both locations, Paul uses this conjunction to explain the point of what he had previously written. So, in v. 42, Paul is making the comparison between old creation and new creation explicit. In v. 45, Paul is identifying the specific subject he has been writing about in all the “what is sown” statements. In v. 45, then, Paul identifies his subject by quoting Genesis 2:7, “The first man Adam became a living being.” Importantly, we must remember that Genesis 2:7 is about Adam’s original creation, before the Fall.

So, when Paul’s repeatedly writes of “what is sown” in v. 42–44, he is not referring to dead bodies, sown as seeds into their graves, as many commentators take these statements.¹⁵⁶ This seems to make a good deal of sense at first, but the interpretation falls apart when we reach v. 44, where Paul says that what is sown is a “natural” body. This is a hard phrase to translate, but the basic idea is that the “natural” (ψυχικόν; *psychikon*) body is characterized by the indwelling of the soul (ψυχή; *psyche*).¹⁵⁷ (We will return to this question a bit later.) Death, however, separates the soul from the body, so that a dead body buried in the ground is characterized by the *absence*, not the presence, of an indwelling soul.¹⁵⁸ Some commentators try to get around this problem by suggesting that Paul is speaking of the (dead) body as it was characterized by the indwelling of a soul during life.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this explanation undercuts the point that commentators are trying to make, since it points back to the *life* of the ensouled body, and not to its *death*.

For these reasons, it is better to understand that when Paul writes of “what is sown” in v. 42–44, he is describing the origins of the whole human race at the creation of Adam.¹⁶⁰ Or, to put this

¹⁵⁶ e.g., “Thus σπείρεται, ‘it is sown,’ is to be understood figuratively: the dead body is buried in the grave.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 711.)

¹⁵⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 272.

¹⁵⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 733.

¹⁵⁹ E.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 713–15.

¹⁶⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 733.

another way, the “sowing” does not refer to the conception of each individual human being who has ever lived, but rather to the creation of the *original* human being, Adam, from whom all other human beings are descended. Paul is saying that *Adam* was sown (i.e., created) perishable, in dishonor, in weakness, and with a “natural” (i.e., ensouled) body, in contrast to Christ, who was raised imperishable, in glory, in power, and with a “spiritual” body.

Now, we must acknowledge that this interpretation has its own difficulty. Namely, how do we say that Adam was created perishable, in dishonor, and in weakness *before* the Fall? Death was not a part of God’s original design, so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “perishable”? Psalm 8:5 insists that Adam was “crowned with glory and honor,” so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “in dishonor”? At creation, God gave Adam and Eve dominion over all creation (Gen. 1:26–28), so what do we mean by saying that Adam was sown “in weakness”?

To answer this question, we must first recognize that Adam was indeed created with a glory, but with an *earthly* glory that falls short of the *heavenly* glory that Christ now offers (v. 40, 47–49). In what sense, then, does Adam’s earthly glory fall short of Christ’s heavenly glory? The creation narrative in Genesis 2 describes Adam’s glory as provisional and incomplete by the symbolism of the two special trees in the garden of Eden. By the first tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam was given a test when God commanded him not to eat of that tree (Gen. 2:17). If Adam passed the test by his “personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience,”¹⁶¹ then Adam would receive a reward. The second tree, the tree of life, was a “pledge” of the promised reward of eternal life (cf. Gen. 3:22).¹⁶² Theologians describe this probationary test in two ways: first, as a covenant of works, to underscore the requirement; and second, as a covenant of life, to underscore the promised reward.¹⁶³ Therefore, if Adam had passed the test and completed the obligations of his probation, the Scriptures suggest that Adam would have been promoted by his obedience from an earthly glory to a heavenly glory.¹⁶⁴

Obviously, Adam did not obey. As the rest of the Bible teaches, Adam failed to keep the covenant that God established with him (cf. Hos. 6:7), and so he forfeited the promise of eternal, heavenly life. For this reason, God barred him from eating of the tree of life (Gen. 3:22). But while the story of Adam’s ultimate failure is true, that failure is not actually Paul’s point here. Paul is not speaking of Adam’s Fall, but of Adam’s original condition, where he possessed an *earthly* (not a heavenly) glory. Again, it is this earthly glory that Paul says was sown perishable, in dishonor, and in weakness.

How, then, can Paul say all of these things about Adam’s original state when he was created? Charles Hodge answers this question well:

It is evident from the entire history, that Adam was formed for an existence on this earth, and therefore with a body adapted to the present state of being; in its essential attributes not

¹⁶¹ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #20.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ For “covenant of works,” see *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.2; 19.1, and *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #30. For “covenant of life,” see *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #20, and *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #12. The terms are used interchangeably.

¹⁶⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 349.

differing from those which we have inherited from him. He was indeed created immortal. Had he not sinned, he would not have been subject to death. For death is the wages of sin. And as Paul elsewhere teaches, death is by sin. From what the apostle, however, here says of the contrast between Adam and Christ; of the earthly and perishable nature of the former as opposed to the immortal, spiritual nature of the latter, it is plain that Adam as originally created was not, as to his body, in that state which would fit him for his immortal existence. After his period of probation was passed, it is to be inferred, that a change in him would have taken place, analogous to that which is to take place in those believers who shall be alive when Christ comes. They shall not die, but they shall be changed. Of this change in the constitution of his body, the tree of life was probably constituted the sacrament. For when he sinned, he was excluded from the garden of Eden, “lest he put forth his hand and take of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever,” Gen. 3, 22. Some change, therefore, was to take place in his body, to adapt it to live for ever.¹⁶⁵

Adam was not liable to death until he sinned, but Adam’s body, as originally created, was not fit for eternal life. His body was perishable, fit for earthly life, not heavenly. In contrast to the heavenly glory that Adam would have received, his body was sown without that kind of honor. Furthermore, his body was weak, incapable of living forever. If Adam had succeeded, he would not have remained in the same form, but his body would have been transformed into the heavenly glory that we may now gain through Christ.

The Natural Body vs. The Spiritual Body (1 Cor. 15:44–46)

Along these lines, the critical contrast Paul is drawing in this passage is between the “natural body” and the “spiritual body.” This is not a distinction between the physical and the nonphysical.¹⁶⁶ Both Adam’s body and Christ’s body were physical, and Christ went to great lengths to demonstrate that he had retained a physical body after his resurrection (e.g., Luke 24:39–43; John 20:20, 27). The distinction is rather between those who are merely fitted for earthly life by an earthly “soul” (ψυχή; *psychē*) versus those who are fitted for heavenly life by a heavenly “spirit” (πνεῦμα; *pneuma*). To understand this distinction, we must remember that Paul clearly differentiated these two kinds of people earlier in 1 Corinthians 2:14–15:¹⁶⁷ “The natural [ψυχικός; *psychikos*] person does not accept the things of the Spirit [πνεύματος; *pneumatos*] of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person [πνευματικός; *pneumatikos*] judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.” The “natural” person is fitted for life in this world only, living entirely according to what can be experienced and understood with our physical senses. By this definition, we may understand why the animals too are called “living beings” (v. 45; cf. Gen. 1:21, 24; 2:7: חַיָּה נֶפֶשׁ; *nephesh chayyah*)—they are fitted for life in this world. Certainly, natural human beings have higher capacities than the animals, but both are fitted for the things of this world.

By contrast, the “spiritual” person has the capacity for fellowship with *the* Spirit, the Holy Spirit

¹⁶⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 349.

¹⁶⁶ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral*, 283.

¹⁶⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 869.

of God. The spiritual person cannot ignore this world, but neither does the spiritual person believe that this world is of ultimate importance. Therefore, when Paul speaks of our spiritual bodies (1 Cor. 15:44), he does not mean that they are nonphysical, but that they are perfectly fitted for eternal fellowship with God. Adam was the original bearer of the body fitted for earthly glory, while Christ (“the last Adam”; vs. 45) was the original bearer of the body fitted for heavenly glory.¹⁶⁸ God’s plan has always been to promote human beings from the earthly glory to a heavenly glory, first the one and then the other (v. 46). The earthly, probationary state in which Adam was created was a prelude to, or preparation for, the heavenly glory that God had chosen as the ultimate state of his people.¹⁶⁹ But, where Adam forfeited that promotion, Christ has secured it for us. Christ is not only a *living* being, but he is the *life-giving* spirit (v. 45).

The Earthly Life vs. The Heavenly Life (1 Cor. 15:47–49)

In the final verses of this section, Paul restates and applies what he has already taught. The first man, Adam, was fitted for life on earth, himself being made *from* the dust of the earth (v. 47a). The second man, was fitted for heavenly life (v. 47b). The phrase “from heaven” does not refer to the *origin* of Christ from heaven, but of the fact that his humanity was fitted for heavenly life by his resurrection from the dead.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, while Christ was not liable to death because of sin, he was nevertheless born with a perishable body fit for earthly life, so that he *could* die. In his current state, fit for heavenly glory, Christ cannot die again: “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18).

We, then, share the natures of these two archetypes of earthly and heavenly humanity. If we are of the dust, then we are like the man of dust, and if we are of heaven, then we are like the man of heaven (v. 48). Then, to clarify, Paul states that as we *now* have born the image of the man of dust, so we *shall* (in the future) bear the image of the man of heaven (v. 49). At the resurrection of the dead, our bodies will be transformed from their lowly condition to the be made like the heavenly glory of Christ’s resurrected body (cf. Phil. 3:21). When that happens, we will be fitted not for life in this world, but for life in the new heavens and the new earth.

We Shall be Changed (1 Cor. 15:50–53)

When Paul writes, “I tell you this, brothers” (v. 50), he is signaling that he is about to summarize and carry to its conclusion everything he has written about the resurrection up to this point.¹⁷¹ In the first part of his summary, he states two ideas in parallel: that (1) flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and that (2) the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable (v. 50). These are not

¹⁶⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 872–73.

¹⁶⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 351.

¹⁷⁰ “There is a history of interpretation that sees these clauses as referring to the *origin* of Adam and Christ. That is, the first man’s origin is ‘from the earth,’ therefore he is ‘earthly,’ while the second man ‘comes from heaven’ and is therefore ‘heavenly.’ More likely, however, these prepositions, which have come about by way of Gen. 2, are intended to be synonyms of *psychikos* and *pneumatikos* and are thus intended to be qualitative, having to do with human life that is characterized by being either ‘of earth’ or ‘of heaven.’” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 876–77.)

¹⁷¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 882–83.

two separate ideas, but two statements describing the same idea.¹⁷² Paul’s point is the same as what he developed in the previous paragraph: that our bodies are equipped for earthly life, and not for heavenly life.¹⁷³ A body composed of mere flesh and blood is not capable of inheriting the full heavenly glory of God’s kingdom, and a perishable body cannot bear up under the imperishable glory of eternity. Even apart from sin, our current condition is not equipped to experience the full weight of God’s glory.¹⁷⁴ The presence of sin, of course, makes transformation all the more necessary.

How, then, will this change come about? Paul says that our transformation is a “mystery” (v. 51). A *mystery* refers to “divine wisdom that was previously ‘hidden’ but has now been ‘revealed.’”¹⁷⁵ In this case, God’s now-revealed wisdom explains the difficulty the Corinthians had in comprehending the resurrection. As they evaluated the limitations of their physical bodies, they could not see how their flesh and blood, perishable bodies could be raised from the dead *in their current form*. This observation is entirely fair and accurate. The problem, though, was that the Corinthians jumped from recognizing the limitations of their current bodies to a false conclusion that those limitations precluded any resurrection whatsoever. Mockingly, they asked, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Cor. 15:35). Paul, then, is acknowledging the partial truth of their concerns, while directing them toward a more accurate conclusion.

All of us, Paul writes, “shall be changed” (v. 51, 52). Whether or not we have fallen asleep (i.e., died), our flesh and blood, perishable bodies must be changed. This transformation will come quickly: “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (v. 52). Furthermore, it will come at “the end” (1 Cor. 15:23–24), or, as Paul puts it here, “at the last trumpet” (v. 52). In the Old Testament, trumpets were used to signal warfare and to celebrate feasts (Num. 10:1–10; Ps. 47:5; cf. 1 Cor. 14:8). The last trumpet signals the same thing—war against God’s enemies, and victory for God’s people (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16). At that trumpet sound on the last day, we will experience a “sudden transition from corruptible nature into a blessed immortality.”¹⁷⁶

This does not mean, though, that our current bodies will be “annihilated.”¹⁷⁷ Paul uses a metaphor of clothing to explain the nature of the transition: “this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (v. 53). We do not take off and discard the old body in order to replace it with a new mortal body.¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Paul insists that he does not mean that we should be “unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal

¹⁷² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 741. Garland helpfully identifies this as an example of *synonymous* parallelism (expressing the same idea in two ways), rather than *synthetic* parallelism (expressing two different, yet related, ideas).

¹⁷³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 353.

¹⁷⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 56. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.v.html>>

¹⁷⁵ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 20.

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 58–59. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.vi.html>>

¹⁷⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 275.

¹⁷⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 744.

may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4). Our new bodies are not *replacements* for the old, but *developments* that will move beyond the old form, like a seed blossoming into a full plant (cf. v. 37–38, 42–44). As Calvin writes, “This passage, too, distinctly proves, that we shall rise again in that same flesh that we now carry about with us, as the Apostle assigns a new quality to it which will serve as a garment.”¹⁷⁹ This is an important point, since it further demonstrates that Paul is talking about human nature as originally created, and not about human nature as it has been affected by sin. Regarding our sin, Paul also uses the metaphor of clothing, but in those passages he is very clear that we must “put off” our old man of sin and “put on” the new man of our life in Christ (Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10).

Victory over Death (1 Cor. 15:54–57)

Paul adds a further implication to this glorious truth that we will be transformed: this transformation will be a great victory: “Death is swallowed up in victory” (v. 54). Paul is citing Isaiah 25:8, where we find the promise that “He [the Lord] will swallow up death forever.” It is unclear where Paul gets the phrase “in victory.”¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, he uses the word “victory” again in v. 55, where he is quoting from Hosea 13:14: “I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.” In my judgment, the most likely explanation is that Paul is not attempting to quote the verse verbatim, but rather to apply the significance of the verse to the context in which he is writing.¹⁸¹ Paul’s point is clear: this transformation that will change our perishable and mortal bodies into imperishable, immortal bodies, will be a great victory struck against death. Remember, Paul had earlier called death “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26).

Specifically, Paul identifies the “sting” and the “power” over which the resurrection will bring victory. First, he explains that “the sting of death is sin” (v. 56a). That is, death’s ability to harm us depends on the presence of sin.¹⁸² The perishability in which we were originally sown (i.e., created; v. 42) would not have been harmful (a “sting”) without sin. If Adam had not fallen into sin, he would have been transformed from perishable to imperishable without ever experiencing death. Once sin entered the world, however, death became a vicious enemy with power over us.

Second, Paul explains that “the power of sin is the law” (v. 56b). Certainly, this does not mean that the law itself is sinful. On the contrary, Paul is saying that the law is the instrument that exposes and condemns our sin (cf. Rom. 7:9). Calvin explains it this way: “in our own opinion it is well with us, and we do not feel our own misery, until the law summons us to the judgment of God, and wounds our conscience with an apprehension of eternal death....Hence he concludes, that whatever

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 61. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.vi.html>>

¹⁸⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 744–45.

¹⁸¹ “I am certainly of opinion, that the Apostle did not deliberately intend to call in the Prophet as a witness, with the view of making a wrong use of his authority, but simply accommodated, in passing, to his own use a sentiment that had come into common use, as being, independently of this, of a pious nature.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 63–64. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.vi.html>>)

¹⁸² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 358.

there is of evil is to be reckoned to our own account, inasmuch as it manifestly proceeds from the depravity of our nature. Hence the law is but the occasion of injury. The true cause of ruin is in ourselves.”¹⁸³ Death stings us because of the power of sin, which the law exposes as sin.

Over this terrible foe stands the victory of God. Rightfully, Paul explains, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57). God has conquered through the person and work of Christ, who was crucified for our sin, and who was raised as the firstfruits of those who will be raised from the dead. No longer does sin have power over us, and, when Christ comes again, we will be transformed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. When that happens, we will be like him, and we will dwell in full fellowship with God forever and ever. Thanks be to God!

Your Labor is not in Vain (1 Cor. 15:58)

The final verse of this chapter gives application to these great doctrines. The resurrection is not merely a theory for us to examine intellectually. Rather, the resurrection gives us hope and confidence to the way that we live. First, Paul says that we should be “steadfast, immovable” (v. 58a). Paul gives a helpful definition for these words “steadfast” and “immovable” (ἀμετακίνητοι; *ametakinētoi*) when he uses them elsewhere in Colossians 1:23: “stable and *steadfast, not shifting* [or, “not moving”; μὴ μετακινούμενοι; *mē metakinoumenoi*] from the hope of the gospel that you heard....” To be steadfast and immovable means anchoring our hope in the gospel, not budging an inch away from it.

This does not mean, though, that Christians should live sedentary lives. If one implication of the resurrection is that we should *not* move, the second implication of the resurrection is that we *should* move: “...always abounding in the work of the Lord” (v. 58b). Our anchored hope in the gospel provides a solid foundation for constant labor for the Lord. To this exhortation, Paul adds a promise: “knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58c). Our labor will not be “vain” or “empty,” just as the grace of God was not “vain” in Paul’s life, but led to his productive labor (1 Cor. 15:10). Paul used the same word for “vain” also in 1 Corinthians 15:14: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is *in vain* and your faith is *in vain*.” Our labor in the Lord is not in vain because it will bring about great fruit and great reward in the resurrection life to come.

Do not move *from* the gospel. Instead, move *because* of the gospel. The gospel that announces the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:4) is the gospel that assures you that you too will be raised with Christ. And, if you are raised up with Christ, then your labor in this life will not be for nothing—that is, your labor in the Lord will be greatly valued in the life to come.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the gospel? How does Paul talk about the gospel in this passage, and elsewhere? If someone asked you to explain the gospel, would your explanation match what Paul says about the gospel here? Specifically, why does Paul use the language of delivering and receiving a tradition when he talks about preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1a, 3)? Why must the gospel rest on historical

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 64–65. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.vi.html>>

fact if it is to have any value for us? What does it mean to “stand in” the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1b)?

2. What are some of the possible reasons that some in Corinth may have denied the resurrection of the dead (cf. Matt. 22:23; Acts 17:32)? What are some of the reasons that people deny the resurrection of the dead today? What are some of the ways that even professing Christians downplay or explain away the bodily resurrection of Christ? What would it mean for our faith to be “in vain” (v. 14)? What would it mean for our faith to be “futile” (v. 17)?

3. What does Paul mean by calling Christ “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20)? What does the Bible tell us about the Feast of Firstfruits in Leviticus 23:9–14? In what sense does Christ fulfill the Feast of Firstfruits? How does the Feast of Firstfruits foreshadow Christ’s redemptive work? How did death come into the world by or through a man (1 Cor. 15:21a)? How does resurrection come by or through Christ (1 Cor. 15:21b)?

4. Why must Christ destroy “every rule and every authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24)? Why must Christ put every enemy under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25)? In what sense is Death the “last enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26)? Why must Christ transfer the completed kingdom to his Father (1 Cor. 15:24, 28)? Why is it important to clarify that Christ transfers the kingdom not by resigning his kingdom altogether, but “in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity” (Calvin)?

5. What does the Bible tell us about human nature, as God originally created it to be (cf. Gen. 1–2)? How is our “natural body” (1 Cor. 15:44, 45, 46) equipped for earthly life? In what sense was Adam’s natural, earthly nature sown “perishable,” “in dishonor,” and “in weakness” (1 Cor. 15:42–43)? Why did Adam need to be raised “imperishable,” “in glory,” and “in power”? How will our “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44) be equipped for full, face-to-face fellowship with God forever?

6. What does it mean to be “steadfast” and “immovable” (v. 58; cf. Col. 1:23)? Practically, what might it look like to drift or to budge from the gospel? Is the gospel of the resurrected Christ a steadfast and immovable anchor in your life? What does it mean to be “always abounding in the work of the Lord” (v. 58)? If you were entirely confident that “in the Lord your labor is not in vain,” what is one area of your life that might change immediately?