

“That God May Be All in All”
1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Introduction: “In 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 we have one of the most difficult passages within the Pauline corpus to interpret.”¹ It is not surprising to see that the first four verses have been called “A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul.”² Whatever the difficulties of this passage may be, let us not neglect it now. Its climax captures the glory of God, which, if nothing else, is worth our attention again.

1. We will be raised from the dead through the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:20–22).

- a. Paul emphatically claimed **in fact Christ has been raised from the dead** (1 Cor 15:20). In refuting their claim **that there is no resurrection of the dead** (1 Cor 15:12), Paul argued that such a claim denies the resurrection of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15:12–19), an event that obviously took place (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–11), and a matter of first importance when delivering the gospel (cf. 1 Cor 15:3).
- b. Moreover, Paul explained that Christ’s being **raised from the dead** is **the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep** (1 Cor 15:20; cf. Lev 23:9–22). Through **man came death**, and so through **a man has come also the resurrection of the dead** (1 Cor 15:21). **In Adam all die**, and **in Christ all shall be made alive** (1 Cor 15:22). Christ the **man** was **raised from the dead**, and Christ will in turn make **all alive** (1 Cor 15:21–22).
- c. Some take **all** in the phrase **shall all be made alive** to refer exhaustively to all humanity—those mentioned in the next two verses—1) **Christ**, 2) **those who belong to Christ**, and 3) those who do *not* belong to Christ who are raised from the dead at **the end** (1 Cor 15:23–24a).
- d. I take **in Christ** in 1 Cor 15:22 to be soteriological. **In Christ** is used elsewhere in the NT 150x to somehow refer to a saving benefit found in Him. Paul was speaking specifically of the Corinthians and telling them that they, **in Christ**, would be **made alive** (1 Cor 15:22). By Him, both Man and Christ, raised from the dead Himself, they, too, would be raised from the dead.

2. Everyone will be raised from the dead at one time or another (1 Cor 15:23–24a).

- a. Then, shifting gears, Paul assumes the verb **made alive** but not the agency of **in Christ** to speak exhaustively of humanity in how **each** person is made alive **in his own order** (1 Cor 15:23). (Scripture says at least 25x that the Father raised Christ from the dead, not that Christ was somehow raised by Himself.) In mentioning **each order**, Paul also gives something of the timing (1 Cor 15:23).
- b. First is **Christ** as **the firstfruits**—He is first in these three orders.
- c. Second comes **at His coming**, namely, **those who belong to Christ**. Christ’s **coming** (*parousia*) is a complex of future events that includes people being **raised from the dead** at both the beginning and end of this **coming**.
 - i. Those who died in Christ, **saints in the church age**, are raised from the dead when we are raptured together and reunited when we join our Lord in the air (cf. 1 Thess 4:13–18). This takes place before the wrath of the day of the Lord (cf. 1 Thess 1:9–10; 5:9–10).

¹ Larry J. Kreitzer, “Kingdom of God/Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul’s Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 526.

² Robert D. Culver, “A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (1956), 141–52.

- ii. Then, **believers from all the prior ages before the church** (whether Israelites and those before the nation began) will be raised from the dead after “a time of trouble” (Dan 12:1–2; cf. Jer 30:7). “Your dead shall live,” but only after obeying the command to “hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by” (Isa 26:20). This fury lasts for seven years (cf. Dan 7:25–27; 9:24–27; Rev 11:2–3; 12:6, 14) and subsides when “the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his **coming**” (2 Thess 2:8).
 - iii. **Tribulation martyrs** will come to life at this time as well (Rev 20:4).
 - iv. In summary, there is one resurrection of **those who belong to Christ** to take place **at His coming**, a resurrection of every single believer who has ever died in the past, made alive at various points within the **coming** of Christ, but all within the **coming** of Christ.
- d. Then, third, comes those at **the end**, those who do *not* belong to Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:24a).

Though **the end** is a brief in its description of this order...

- i. Paul has spoken of people in the first two orders (**Christ** and **those who belong to Him**), so it natural to conclude that **the end** is an order involving people as well (1 Cor 15:24a).
- ii. Paul’s use of **then...then** (*epeita...eita*) indicates that the second order comes chronologically after the first and that the third order comes chronologically after the second. (Paul uses these time-marking adverbs in this same order to indicate the sequence of Christ’s appearances in 1 Cor 15:7. Cf. 1 Cor 15:5–7 for multiple uses of *epeita* and *eita*.) In other words, there is a gap of time between the first and second orders (about 2,000 years) and then another gap of time between the second and third orders, a shorter gap elsewhere described as 1,000 years by the apostle John (Rev 20:2–6) and “many days” by Isaiah (Isa 24:22; cf. 24:21–23).
- iii. If those at **the end** involve neither Christ nor those who belong to Him, then they must be those who do *not* belong to Him, i.e., unbelievers who will be recalled at the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11–15), those who, after being “gather together as prisoners in a pit” will “after many days...be punished” (Isa 24:22).

3. The resurrection of unbelievers takes place alongside other events that end the ages (1 Cor 15:24b–28a).

a. The Delivery of the Kingdom of Christ

- i. **The end** is further specified for its timing by taking place alongside **when** Christ **delivers the kingdom to God the Father** (1 Cor 15:24).
- ii. If this passage allows us to say anything of the *timing* of the kingdom of Christ (note: this is the *mediatorial kingdom*, not the *universal kingdom* over which the Father is always King), it certainly speaks to its *end*. What is not mentioned is its *beginning*. Being yet future, its beginning is at the descent of Christ when He takes His throne and expels His enemies (Matt 25:31; Rev 3:21). Though there is this initial ridding of His enemies, as the kingdom progresses, enemies rise again in the end. Those who have survived the Tribulation enter the kingdom in their nonglorified bodies. Children are born to these believers (cf. Isa 65:20), multiplication continues, and many of those born during the kingdom never believe and follow Satan after his release from the abyss (Rev 20:7–8).

Then, finally, Christ will rid the earth of His enemies once and for all (Rev 20:9–10). Then comes the resurrection of unbelievers at **the end** (1 Cor 15:24a; cf. Rev 20:11–15) and the end of **the kingdom** of Christ (1 Cor 15:24b).

We have begun to explain the next of our two events...

b. The Destruction of God's Enemies

- i. This delivery comes only **after** Christ's **destroying every rule and every authority and power** (1 Cor 15:24). If **death** is the last of these **enemies** to be destroyed, then a **rule, authority, and power** seems to include the impersonal and yet anything else that somehow stands as an enemy of God and Christ (1 Cor 15:24–25).
- ii. This destruction will take place because Ps 110:1 promises that it will—**He must reign until he** (Christ) **has put all enemies under His feet** (1 Cor 15:25). (Psalm 110:1, ESV: The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”)
- iii. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death**, and **death** must indeed be one of the enemies **destroyed** because, as Ps 8:6 promises, **God** at this time **has put all things**, death included, **in subjection under His feet** (1 Cor 15:26). (Psalm 8:6, ESV: You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.)
- iv. The Father is obviously **excepted** from this subjection (1 Cor 15:27).

c. The Subjection of the Son

Finally, even **the Son Himself will also be subjected to the Father who put all things in subjection under His Son** (1 Cor 15:28).

4. The purpose for conquering death through the resurrection, and the purpose for why God has been leading all the ages towards this end, is that His glory might be perfectly manifest in all things (1 Cor 15:28b).

- a. The first **all in all in all** is *qualitative* and refers to how the Father somehow becomes **all** (1 Cor 15:28b). This cannot refer to Him in His being as He is perfectly who He is, has been, and always will be. The qualitative improvement from less than **all** to fully **all** must take place in something other than Him (1 Cor 15:28b).
 - i. In other words, we are not talking about the *intrinsic* or *inherent* glory of God. “Because God is God, He is the only being of whom it can be said that He possesses inherent glory. We cannot give this glory to Him. This glory belongs to God by virtue of who He is. Accordingly, God’s intrinsic glory cannot change. It would be impossible for Him to increase in His glory, because that would mean that He was previously less than perfect. Nor can God diminish in His glory, because He is always the same, forever glorious. God was, is, and shall be glorious throughout all the ages to come.”³
 - ii. What we *are* talking about is the *ascribed* glory of God. “There is a second aspect of the glory of God, distinguished from His intrinsic glory, which is His ascribed glory. While His intrinsic glory pertains to who He is and the making known of His attributes to us,

³ Steven J. Lawson, “One Master Theme: The Glory of God,” *Expositor’s Magazine* 2 (2014), 9.

ascribed glory pertains to our proper response to His intrinsic glory. Although we cannot add to His intrinsic glory, we can give to Him ascribed glory. This calls for our praise and for living in a manner worthy of our calling.”⁴ At this time, **all** that is included in **all things** will find that the Father is **all in** them that He intends to be.

- b. The second use of **all in all in all**, then, is *quantitative* and refers to **all things** that will be subjected to the Father (1 Cor 15:28b). In context, this second use of **all** (or **all things**) refers to the Father’s enemies, those who belong to Christ, and even Christ Himself (1 Cor 15:28b). The inclusivity of these phrase captures everything besides as well. **All** of these will at this time find that the Father is **all** that He intends to be **in** them (1 Cor 15:28b). In His enemies, His glory is manifest in justice. In those who belong to Christ, the Father’s glory is manifest in salvation. In His Son, His glory is manifest in that, though both are God, the Father is preeminent even over Him.
- c. “Here, then, is the final and eternal consummation of the goal and unifying center of God’s activities. God’s ultimate purpose of receiving exclusive self-glory throughout the entire universe will be realized. Everything and everyone will be in absolute visible conformity to God’s will and design, and all opposition will be incarcerated forever in God’s eternal penitentiary, thereby forcing even from these an everlasting confession that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*’ (Phil 2:11).”⁵
- d. This being the case, we see why Charles Ryrie would say, “The unifying principle of normative dispensationalism is doxological, or the glory of God.”⁶
- e. What’s encouraging is that God’s goal for the ages includes you and me. We will be raised from the dead and glorified so that we might perfectly live out the Father’s intended purposes for us. “God’s ultimate purpose and the unifying principle of His activity is *to glorify Himself by establishing a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship with human beings in His image and dwelling with them forever.*”⁷
- f. God desired this goal with the creation of man and all things, and this goal has been the operative principle behind His dealings with His creation ever since. When Adam sinned, God promised that the effects of sin would be undone. Since then, he preserved the human race through Noah during a time of global judgment. He revealed that through Abraham blessing would come to the nations. This blessing is through Christ who fulfilled the Mosaic Law’s demands and, though not deserving so, paid the penalty for breaking it, becoming a sinless substitute, both man and God, for whosoever might believe. Christ arose and will one day glorify us, whether by rapture or resurrection. We will reign with Him for 1,000 years and then join Him as He judges the unbelieving world at the end of the ages. Then, finally, in bringing about this goal in His perfect wisdom and way—the Father will be all in all.
- g. “In so short a passage Paul has traced paradise lost and regained, and the recovery of the submission of all things to God as in the beginning of creation.”⁸

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 153–54.

⁶ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 93–94.

⁷ McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 137.

⁸ Bruce Winter, “1 Corinthians” in *New Bible commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 1184.

Conclusion: If God can work all things together for the good of one day perfectly displaying His glory, surely you can know that whatever you may be facing, God is working even these things in your life towards this goal as well. May we praise God through Christ for the hope of our resurrection, that death will be destroyed, and that the Father will be all in all.