

THE DEMISE OF DEATH
1 Cor. 15:20-28

Turn back to 1 Cor. 15 in God's holy, inspired, inerrant Word...

Listen to one of the *least debated*, least disputed verses in the Bible: Rom. 5:17 tells us that, as a result of Adam's sin passed down to us all, "death reigns" (repeat).

Who can deny those two words, this obvious fact, that "death reigns" in this world? – Who can argue history is not one long story of Death's rule & dominion over humanity? – [As we just saw earlier in our Scripture reading in Gen. 5, "and he died"....]

God warned man that if he sinned, Death should show no mercy, but would rule ruthlessly, with an iron sceptre: Gen. 2, speaking to Adam & Eve of the forbidden tree: "On the day that you eat from it, you will surely die." –

And so they did. – Gen. 3, "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return", said the LORD. – And so the soil has devoured Adam's sons & daughters ever since: "death reigns".

The painful evidence is all around us. – News' headlines are just obituaries in a different form:

Right here at Northgate on Thursday, a guard shot dead. – At least 67 dead in Nairobi after a brutal mall siege last weekend. – At least 42 dead after a boat sank on the Niger River on Friday. –

85 Christians slain in a Pakistan church last Sunday. – The day before that, at least 515 dead in a Pakistan earthquake. – And this all just in the last week. – "Death reigns".

Over 1,000 people die on South African roads every month. – Worldwide, nearly 2 million children die every year on the day they are born. – 4 million die before their 1st birthday. – "Death reigns".

107 people die every minute. – That's 300 people since I started this sermon. – That's over 5,000 dead by the time I finish this sermon. –

This could be the last sermon you ever hear. – It could be the last sermon I ever preach: "Death reigns".

[No one escapes the jaws of death. – The strongest woman, whose gray hair seems to defy the winter's hardest frost – even that iron woman at last is bent and dies. – The wealthiest prince has no price by which to bribe death.

Name one other ruler who has been so successful as the Grim Reaper? – Hitler has slain his millions, Stalin his tens of millions, but they were only servants of Death, mere executioners fulfilling Death's decree. – To this day, nothing has quenched Death's thirst for human prey and for the blood of nations.]

[Every time you buckle your seatbelt. – Every time you set the alarm at night. – Every time you get sick, think about eternity, or imagine life without a certain loved one – these are all reminders of this one truth: "Death reigns".]

BUT one day, all this will change. – Death’s reign is universal, but temporary. – It had a beginning, and it will have an end. – There was a time when Death *was not*, and there is a time coming when Death *will not*. –

Like humans, Death also has a lifespan, and must die one day. ‘It is appointed unto death once to die’.

But HOW?! – Who is strong enough to overthrow Death? – What champion is mighty enough to end Death’s reign and to set up a new & greater kingdom? – What conqueror can crush such an invincible foe as Death? –

Paul answers this for us here, in one of the most powerful passages in all of 1 Corinthians:

Stand, Read & Pray:

Recall the context & main problem Paul was addressing: v. 12b...

They accepted that Christ rose; but to believe that Christians will also rise, that was too much. – Their Greek minds just could not (would not!) accept that their soul would ever need a body again in the life to come.

So Paul is going to show them here in vv. 20ff, that they were not just denying that their bodies would resurrect. – By denying that one biblical truth, they were *rejecting God Himself!* –

By denying that Christians will be physically raised one day, they were claiming that Death would have the final say, not God. – Whether they realised it or not, they were implying that Death’s kingdom is stronger than Christ’s kingdom. – They were saying that history is following Death’s plan, instead of God’s plan; and that all the glory goes to Death, not to God.

A LOT was at stake in this one unbiblical view of some in the Corinthian church.

Give title...

The Lord Jesus Christ is referred to 20x in these 9 vss, more than 2x per verse! – HE is clearly the Champion & focal point of this passage.

****THREE IMAGES of Christ, the Destroyer of Death in God’s great resurrection plan for us:***

1. v. 20 (& v. 23a), Christ the FIRSTFRUITS

v. 20a – Two opening words that are like two trumpet blasts for Paul, a phrase Paul reserves from emphatic gospel declarations: “BUT NOW!”

NO MORE “ifs”, like we saw all over vv. 12-19, no more hypothetical ‘what if Christ never rose’. – Today it is a great proclamation of all that is true BECAUSE Christ DID rise!

v. 20b – “Firstfruits”, for us urban folk who ain’t so educated in how farmin’ works:

[+ Farmer Jack goes out early one spring morning and, at last, he sees that first head of grain, that first ear of mealies. – So he skips all the way back home and says, ‘Mary, the firstfruits! Harvest is on its way, the full crop is coming! Don’t you just love springtime, so full of hope, full of life, full of promise?!’]

+ Remember the Jewish festival of firstfruits, Lev. 23? – What were they do with their firstfruits? – NOT hoard them anxiously, in case they lost the rest!...

NO, they were to bring the first sheaves of grain to the priest. – The priest would then wave it before the Lord as an offering, dedicated to God, with thankful hearts – consecrating the whole harvest to God, in faith for Him providing the full crop in the days to come.

NB, WHEN did the Jews celebrate this holy-day? – Lev. 23: The “day after Sabbath”, i.e., on a Sunday. – Know WHICH Sunday? – The Sunday after the Friday when Passover meal was to be eaten?

Hmmm....An accident? – Hardly! – That Jesus ‘just happened’ to die on Passover Friday, and just ‘happened’ to rise on Firstfruits Sunday? – God’s timing is impeccable!

Behold on Friday, Christ our Passover, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. – Behold on Sunday, “Christ our firstfruits”, risen from the dead!

I.e., ‘There’s a lot more resurrection on the way!’

v. 20c – (Not those who snore in church!) The Bible’s favt metaphor for dead Christians. – Not soul sleep, but body sleep. – Scripture is clear on this:

At death our souls instantly enter the presence of Christ, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” – BUT our bodies at death are laid to rest, as a picture of what’s coming, ‘Watch this space!’. –

v. 6 earlier, “fallen asleep”; v. 18, “asleep in Christ” (cf. v. 51 coming). – As Jesus said of the body of Jairus’ deceased daughter, “She is not dead, she is asleep” (Mk 5; cf. 1 Thess. 4:13,15; 2 Pet 3:4).

I.e., for the Christian’s body, death is like sleeping: it’s necessary, but it’s temporary, and it’s reversible, it will not last. – Soon those bodies will awake, they shall rise!...

NB, Christ is NOT just the “firstfruits” of some standard crop that gets harvested every year, season after season. – ‘OK, cool, another mealie, grain, cotton crop, etc.’

Oh no: Christ is the pledge and guarantee, the picture, of a whole new crop, a new kind of fruit never before harvested, ever in history! –

Christ is the Leader of a whole new breed, a brand new generation of the ‘Risen People’, the ‘Once Dead, Now Alive, Never-to-Die Again, Glorified People’! – As Paul will explain in detail from vv. 35ff!...

+ Remember, God has raised other dead people: In the OT the sons of the widow of Zarephath, and of the Shunammite woman (1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 4 & 13); Jairus’ 12 yr. old daughter; the widow of Nain’s only son (Lk. 7). – And best of all, Lazarus, after being dead 4 days.

HOWEVER, what did *all* of these resurrections have in common? – They were temporary, NONE of them had glorified bodies, they all still had to die again. – Imagine, you having two funerals, that gets expensive!...

NOT SO with Christ's new crop, of which He is "firstfruits". – We will rise with new, glorified bodies like our Lord's (more on this in wks to come). – We will rise, never to die again! – If God could raise Jesus like this, "the firstfruits", then there's more resurrection on the way!...

Our resurrection is the necessary SEQUEL to Christ's!

[~ P. Lewis, *Glory of Christ: In the bodily resurr of Jesus Christ from the dead on the first Easter Sunday...we have in principle the resurr of the entire church of God. The tremendous power that opens the graves on the Last Day and raises up from the sea & land countless glorified bodies will be solely the power of His resurrection.*

The massed array of all the saints who will stand ranged alongside of Christ at His judgment, complete and fully redeemed in their risen glorified bodies, will be but the consummated effect of that decisive event. (p. 380)]

+ People love to celebrate 'firsts': Columbus, first to discover the New World, followed by many other explorers; Wright Brothers, first to fly, and today we've all joined in;

Chris Barnard, performed first heart transplant (1967), and many have followed; Neil Armstrong, first man on the moon (1969), and many have followed.

BUT here is a first in a league of its own, one that out-classes all other firsts put together: v. 20...!

Jesus, the first to walk out of his own tomb with a new, glorified body that was invincible and immortal! – And we too will follow!

→Beloved: Do you know Christ as YOUR "Firstfruits"? – Are you trusting God for your future and looking forward to the full harvest when we are all raised? – Can you say with Paul, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain". – It's been said:

'The graveyard reminds us of the brevity of life. But Jesus' empty tomb reminds us of *the brevity of death!*'

→Dear friend: When Christ returns, will it be a time of joyful harvesting & hope for you? – OR do you dread the day He returns and you stand before Him?

Will your death be a mere nap, a restful, hopeful sleep, waiting for your Lord's return? – OR will your death be a restless, hopeless waiting until your body is raised only to be judged and sentenced to Hell, as Scripture warns?

Repeat: v. 20...

2. vv. 21-22, Christ the LAST ADAM

vv. 21-22 – Here is the whole story of the human race, a story of *twofold solidarity*. – I.e., All the Bible and all of history can be summed up under these two Heads that we are

joined to, Adam & Christ. – There are two representatives, two leaders, under whom all of mankind lines up.

Of all that Paul has given us in his many epistles, this is some of his MOST profound & important teaching. – The main parallel is in Rom.5 – Turn there:

Rom. 5:12-14 – Adam was a type, an OT picture of a NT reality. – Adam was a shadow that pointed to Christ who is the substance & reality, the “Last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45). –

Then Rom. 5:15ff spells out this contrast between these Heads & Representatives of the human race...

Where the 1st Adam failed, the Last Adam succeeds. – The 1st Adam brought death, the Last Adam brings life. – The 1st Adam destroyed, the Last Adam saves.

Back to 1 Cor. 15...

HOW has the world gotten into the mess it is in, and how will we get out of it? – Answer: You must understand what has happened because of Adam, and what has happened and WILL happen because of Christ.

+ Still blows my mind when I think about it: The catastrophic, earth-shattering consequences of one moment, when one man ate from one piece of fruit, picked from one tree, in the middle of one garden, in disobedience to one command. – [Demo.] It took a few seconds.... –

YET here we are: still feeling the effects of that one act, thousands of years later. – How could one foolish choice lead to *all this*: all the death, all the destruction, all the pain, all the heartache all around us, and inside of us, and written on our very faces.

And this is just the beginning. – For all eternity, for billions and billions and billions of years, people will be tormented by the consequences of Adam’s one sin. – It is more horrific than we can comprehend:

vv. 21a, 22a...

'O Adam, what have you done, what have you done?!'...

+ Not long ago, I was with some people who’ve been influenced by the health-wealth, prosperity false gospel. – They’re getting older, and trying to plan out the final years of their lives. – The husband is already living in borrowed time and should’ve died 6 yrs ago by all accounts medically. –

YET in the whole conversation, none of them wanted to use the ‘D’ word; they did everything possible to avoid, to ensure that they only spoke positive words, no negative words. –

But I wanted to just say, ‘Hang on, who are you fooling? We’re dying, we could die tomorrow, none of our plans are certain, we will NOT live forever....

+ In contrast, last December when we were visiting my parents, they sat us me & my sister down after breakfast one morning, with our spouses, to speak frankly about how they want us to handle their aging & dying. –

Even though they are both presently in great health, they wanted to speak openly & frankly with us about not artificially prolonging their death, whenever that time comes. – They are Christians, so they can look Death square in the eye without fear.

→ This is why we need a *biblical worldview*, why we talk a lot about biblical worldview conferences & concepts: Only the biblical worldview can adequately explain why death is the universal fate for all humanity. – And only the biblical worldview can offer hope, the true remedy, the only cure to our mortality!

Repeat: vv. 21-22...!

LOOK where Paul is going here: IF this curse of death is ever to be reversed, if this ruin is ever to be undone, HOW must it come? – WHO could accomplish such a universal defeat, such an epic triumph? –

Any such Hero, any Saviour, would have to be another man. – No angel could accomplish this. – No cherubim or seraphim, nor any other kind of heavenly creature. – Only a man.

Furthermore, Scripture shows us, it must be a God-man: This Rescuer would have to be 100% God, able to pay the infinite price required by our sin against an infinitely holy God.

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YET 100% man, to stand in our place and act as our substitute, drinking the cup of wrath we deserved, taking our punishment, bearing our curse. – Repeat: v. 21...

QUESTION: In v. 22, is Paul teaching universalism, that ALL will be saved in the end and Hell will be empty or frozen over? – Not at all.

We must stick with his parallels here: Every son of Adam dies, every son of Christ lives. – Everyone joined to Adam dies. – Everyone joined to Christ lives. –

As v. 23 will specify, “those who are Christ’s, who belong to Christ”, they “will be made alive”, their bodies will rise & be glorified, like Christ’s. – NOT everyone, but only these.

It’s natural descent VS supernatural descent, physical offspring VS spiritual offspring:

I.e., We’re in Adam by nature, but in Christ by faith. – In order to die, all that’s required is to be born into this world. – From conception in fact, you’re an Adam-follower, sure to die.

In order to defeat death and rise again, “you must be born again” (Jn. 3). – Once you are converted, you’re a Christ-follower, sure of eternal life.

[Reread: vv. 21-22...]

~ M. Henry – Paul here is showing ‘that the Last Adam has more power to make us happy than the first Adam had to make us miserable’.

*In Christ the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.*

As we sing at Christmas time in “Hark the Herald Angels Sing!”:

*Come, Desire of Nations, come,
Fix in us Thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.*

*Adam's likeness now efface,
Stamp Thine image [Christ!] in its place:
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.*

→ Is that YOUR prayer? – That you begin to resemble the 1st Adam less & less, and the Last Adam, Christ, more & more? – That all around would see that you are less of an Adam-follower and more of a Christ-follower?!...

BUT NOW – moving into v. 23, Paul knows there is a burning question in our minds:

IF Christ is our “Firstfruits” who promises that we’ll be his resurrection-harvest, and IF Christ is our “Last Adam” who has reversed the ruin from the 1st Adam, then why do we still have to die?!

IF Christ has crushed Death at the cross, why do we still grow old, get sick, die, and lay there rotting in the grave?...

ANSWER:

v. 23 – It is guaranteed that Christ will raise us. – BUT not before death, and not immediately after death. – My deceased, ‘sleeping’ (v. 20) body must wait until Jesus’ returns, until the Second Coming of our Lord, until that final day.

See, Death is the God-ordained consequence of Adam’s rebellion and our sin. – Even for the born-again believer, death is the final outcome of living in a fallen world. – Rom. 5:12; 6:23...

Unless you’re alive at the Rapture, God has planned that each of us must experience death (walk through death’s door) *before we gain all the benefits of the salvation* which He earned for us on the cross!

v. 23a, “rank, order” = a military term, used for a regiment of soldiers/troops, each assigned their place & rank. – So here’s Paul’s 3rd & most detailed picture:

3. vv. 24-28, Christ as KING

Let me first read the text again: vv. 24-28...

Now, this is dense, this is packed, it’s rich! – It’s been called a ‘little apocalypse’, a thumbnail sketch of eschatology, a summary of God’s entire end-times agenda for history & the world. – So I don’t want to rush this.

To do this passage & this topic justice, in light of what the rest of Scripture says, we'll come back next week & unpack God's timeline for world history & end-times. – Pray for me & invite a friend!...

But that will be a more topical message. – For today, let's savour Paul's main point here in vv. 24-28. – Here's what I think is going on (Paul's logic, his line of thought here):

v. 26 – HOW will Death be defeated? – When God raises our bodies! – When the Last Adam's triumph is complete. – When the full harvest comes, of which Christ was the Firstfruits!...

~ Here is the Christian answer to the Grk philosophers. They said that there is no resurrection; but Paul says there will be NO death! – Beat that!...

~ From Peter Lewis, The Glory of Christ:

Inasmuch as Christ has paid for our sins, death now has no more rights over us; rather CHRIST has rights now over death. In the final dispute between Christ & death, it is Christ who must emerge victorious, for He has both power & right on His side. He will not allow His work at Calvary to be bypassed or to go for nought.

Rather, death itself will go for nought in His appointed time. The risen Christ lives to affirm the full worth of His atonement for sin and to bring us to a full & glorious reconciliation.

Death is the contradiction of all this and so must be destroyed – in our life as it was in His (cf. v. 27; Php. 3:21). The resurrection of Jesus is for us [believers] the historic, public, and unbreakable guarantee given by God the Father of our own destiny and future glory (vv. 20-23).

More on this next week – and on how v. 28c, God's final goal, will be accomplished in the end-times!...

CONCL. – Repeat 3 points...

+ Every Easter we love to recall the events of that first Resurrection Sunday: the stone rolled away; the folded grave clothes; the radiant angels inside; Peter & John running to check it out for themselves; Mary weeping and thinks Jesus is the gardener, and on & on. We treasure each scene – and all that Easter meant for Christ and means for us personally.

But do you realise what else was happening on that 1st Easter. It was not just an isolated event, a very special occasion. – It was the beginning of the end. – It was the start of Death's demise. – It was Christ breaking the back of Death, snapping his spine.

Jesus' resurrection was Him giving final notice to Satan. – It was Jesus delivering a death sentence to Death.

When God raised Christ from the dead, He set in motion a chain of events that would culminate in the final destruction of Death itself!

→For the SAVED: Yes, we still live under the shadow of a once-mighty reign of death since the Garden. – YET death is in the death throes; death is breathing its final breaths, still deadly, yet defeated!

Here's what awaits us; I've read the end of the story: vv. 50f (esp. vv. 54-57!)...

→For the UNSAVED: Death is still your worst enemy: He lurks everywhere, and he follows you with noiseless steps. – You never know where he has prepared his ambush. –

Death may meet you at home, or on the road. – Death could meet you at the dinner table, or in bed. – Death may sneak up on you at work, or at play. – But one thing is certain: Death is an enemy, and your hour will come.

Look to Christ today & be saved!

+ Jesus' words at the funeral of Lazarus, just before raising Him: John 11:25-26...

*Crown Him the Lord of life:
Who triumphed o'er the grave,
Who rose victorious to the strife
For those He came to save;*

*His glories now we sing,
Who died and rose on high,
Who died eternal life to bring
And lives that death may die.*

PRAY: 1 Cor 3, in Christ, 'all things are ours, even death is ours'!