

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

By Jacob Gerber

In v. 20, Paul makes a hard transition out of the previous section.¹ No longer does Paul consider the horrifying consequences that would follow if Christ had not been raised from the dead.² 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.³ 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.⁴ Specifically, Paul tells us that *Christ is the firstfruits of God's resurrection harvest*.

Christ is the Firstfruits of our Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20)

Primarily, by calling Christ's resurrection the *firstfruits*, Paul is referring to a general understanding of the significance of 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.⁵ In the previous section, Paul warned that the logical consequences of denying *our* resurrection would be to invalidate *Christ's* resurrection. Now, Paul is explaining the logical consequences that move in the opposite direction: if Christ *has* been raised, then we too *must* be raised up with him.⁶ In both cases, Paul takes for granted

¹ “*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.)

² 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>>

³ “But now, *vvvì déé*, 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.)

⁴ “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.)

⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 829.

⁶ “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

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 23:9–14.⁷ 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.

Christ is the Source of our Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:21)

In v. 21, Paul goes on to explain the causal connection between Christ's resurrection and our resurrection.⁸ Christ did not rise for himself, individually and alone, any more than Adam died for himself, individually and alone.⁹ 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 resurrected from the dead by their solidarity with Christ.¹⁰ In the original Greek, the words *came/has*

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.)

⁷ 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.

⁸ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324.

⁹ 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>>

¹⁰ “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

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.¹¹

Christ is the Guarantee of our Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:22)

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.¹² 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*.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ Since Christ was not born “by ordinary generation,” he was not born *in Adam*, so he did not inherit Adam’s curse by nature.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

Discussion Questions

1. 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? What does the particular case of the Feast of Firstfruits tell us about the ways that Christ fulfills the ceremonial law in general?

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.)

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 663.

¹² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324–25.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 664.

¹⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 324–26.

¹⁵ “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)

¹⁶ “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)

2. How did death come into the world *by* or *through* a man (1 Cor. 15:21)? Why did Adam function as a source, or cause, or medium, or conduit for bringing death to the rest of the human race (cf. Rom. 5:12–21)? Based on this logic, how does Christ also bring resurrection of the dead into the world? What does the Westminster Larger Catechism mean in questions #22 and #52 by describing both Adam and Christ as “public person(s)”?

3. What does it mean to be *in Adam* (1 Cor. 15:22)? How does someone come to be *in Adam*? What are the consequences for being *in Adam*? What does it mean to be *in Christ*? How does someone come to be *in Christ*? What are the consequences for being *in Christ*? Does 1 Corinthians 15:22 teach that absolutely everyone will be saved, as the universalists teach? If not, how does the text suggest otherwise?