

1 Corinthians 15: Paul's *Unified* Explanation of the Resurrection

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The fifteenth chapter from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians "contains the fullest treatment of the resurrection...found anywhere in the Bible."¹ Since it discusses extraordinary events which have yet to come to pass, 1 Corinthians 15 naturally stimulates a whole host of eschatological questions. For instance, what does this section of Scripture teach New Covenant (NC) believers regarding the order of end-times events? Does it teach a two-stage return of Christ, that is to say, a pretribulation rapture of the church seven years before Christ's Second Advent, as taught by Dispensationalists? Does this chapter support the existence of a future premillennial kingdom as taught by all versions of premillennialism? And what does it say, if anything, concerning Christ's current activity in heaven? Biblical answers to these and many other questions regarding the resurrection can be found through a contextual exegesis of this chapter. The conclusion of this paper is that 1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches that the *single* general resurrection occurs at the end of the NC age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *one-stage* Second Coming.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul is responding to "a decidedly aberrant view of the resurrection," which had begun to take root in the church at Corinth.² The Apostle Paul begins his resurrection discourse in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 by arguing that the resurrection is central to the Gospel itself. Then, in 1 Corinthians 15:12, the Apostle declares, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"³ In response to this denial of the future bodily resurrection of believers, Paul authoritatively proclaims, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain" (1 Cor 15:13-14). Regarding the Apostle Paul's response, Anthony Hoekema states: "Paul replies to this error by indicating that if one believes in the resurrection of Christ, one cannot very well deny the resurrection of believers....One cannot, in other words, deny the resurrection of believers without denying the resurrection of Christ, since the two go together. And if one denies the resurrection of Christ, his faith is in vain- he is still in his sin."⁴ Likewise, Carson states that Paul "denies that any wedge can be driven between these two resurrections so far as their nature is concerned, thereby forcing his readers to direct their gaze and their aspirations to the triumph at the end."⁵

Understanding the structure of 1 Corinthians 15 is crucial to recognizing that the chapter is indeed a *unified* explanation of the *single* general resurrection. The chapter may be summarily outlined in the following manner:

15:1-11	The Centrality of the Resurrection to the Gospel
15:12-19	The Necessity of the Resurrection to the Gospel
15:20-28	<u>The Sequence of the Resurrection:</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Christ the Firstfruits2. Adam vs. Christ3. Resurrection occurs at Christ's coming (<i>parousía</i>)4. Destruction of Death
15:29	Baptism for the dead ⁶

¹Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 247.

²Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; reprint 2005), 421.

³All of this writer's Bible citations are from the NASB unless otherwise stated.

⁴Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 247.

⁵Carson & Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 417.

⁶It is best to understand that Paul mentions the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead in order to point out the inconsistency of the Corinthian denial of a future bodily resurrection, not to endorse or condone this practice.

- 15:30-32 Paul's Persecution: Another Justification for the Resurrection
 15:33-34 Apostolic Exhortation
 15:35-49 The Resurrection Body
 1. Earthly perishable body vs. spiritual imperishable body
 2. **Adam vs. Christ**
 15:50-58 The Manner of Resurrection
 1. Resurrection of the Elect
 2. **Destruction of Death**

Notice that both the Adam – Christ comparison and the destruction of death are mentioned twice within Paul's resurrection discourse. Both are mentioned briefly in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; however, each receives greater treatment later in the chapter. For example, the Apostle Paul introduces the typological comparison between Adam and Christ in verses 20-21, and he later expands this concept in verses 45-49. Similarly, he states that death is the last enemy to be destroyed in 1 Corinthians 15:26, while later devoting verses 50-58 to the swallowing up or *destruction* of death. The repetition of these concepts strongly implies that Paul is teaching a *single* general resurrection when death is swallowed up at the end of the NC age when Christ returns at His Second Coming in both 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, the Apostle Paul declares, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming [*parousía*]." There are two primary meanings of the Greek word *parousía*: 1) "the state of being present at a place, *presence*" and 2) "arrival as the first stage in presence, *coming, advent*."⁷ A contextual word study of the Greek word *parousía* (1 Cor 15:23) and its various synonyms further strengthens the argument that 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 describe the exact same event.⁸ For example, verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches "that those who are Christ's" will be resurrected "at His coming [*parousía*]." Couple this verse with 1 Thessalonians 3:13 which declares, "...so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming [*tē parousía*] of our Lord Jesus **with all His saints**" [**brackets & emphasis mine**].⁹ The implications of this second verse are quite staggering: at His *parousía*, the Lord Jesus Christ will return with *all* His saints! Hoekema perceptively writes, "...the passage clearly says that Christ will return with *all* his saints, not just with some of them. How does this leave room for the reemergence of other saints who have not yet been born, and who must still be converted during the millennium?"¹⁰ *There is only one general resurrection at the end of the NC age when Christ returns at His one-stage Second Coming.*

As previously stated, the destruction of Death is highlighted twice in the fifteenth chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. The Apostle writes the following in 1 Corinthians 15:22-26:

⁷Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker [BAGD], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 780.

⁸An exhaustive contextual word study of *parousía* and other synonymous terms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, such a study should include the following terms and references: 1) *parousía* (Matthew 24:27-31, 24:37-39; 1 Thess 3:13, 4:15-17, 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 2:8; 2 Pet 3:4, 3:10-12; 1 Cor 15:22-26), 2) *apokalypsis* (1 Cor 1:7; 2 Thess 1:4-10; 1 Pet 1:7, 1:13, 4:13), 3) *epiphaneia* (1 Tim 6:14; 2 Thess 2:8; 2 Tim 4:1, 4:8; Titus 2:13), 4) *Day of the Lord* (2 Pet 3:10-12; 2 Thess 2:1-2; 1 Thess 4:15-5:10; Zeph 1:14-18; Isa 13:6-13; Joel 2:1-11; cf. Matt 24:27-31, Rev 6:12-17), and 5) *Day of Christ* (Phil 1:6, 1:10, 2:16; 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14). Special attention should be given to overlapping references where a few of these terms are clearly equated or used interchangeably (e.g. 2 Pet 3:10-12; 1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Thess 2:1-8). Furthermore, the absence of any explicit reference to unbelievers, judgment, torment, punishment, glory, etc. does not justify understanding any of the above verses as a reference to a pretribulation rapture. *Such argumentation is from silence and extremely weak.*

⁹Some argue that "all His saints" in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 refers to *angels* and not *believers*. While this is a possible interpretation of this phrase, it is more likely that Paul is referring to believers here, since this is how he primarily uses "saints" in his writings (cf. Rom 1:7, 8:27, 12:13, 15:25-26, 16:2, 16:15; 1 Cor 1:2, 6:1-2, 14:33, 16:1, 16:15; 2 Cor 1:1, etc.). Furthermore, even if 1 Thessalonians 3:13 is understood in this manner, "all his saints" would include *all believers* and *all angels*, since the word *saints* can carry the meaning of believers and/or angels.

¹⁰Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 218.

²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's **at His coming** [*tē parousía autou*], ²⁴ then *comes* the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵ For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. ²⁶ **The last enemy that will be abolished is death [brackets & emphasis mine].**

In 1 Corinthians 15:51-57, he declares:

⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ **For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.** ⁵⁴ **But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory.** ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ [**emphasis mine**].

Since Death is destroyed in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, the *parousía* of 1 Corinthians 15:23 **is** the event described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Furthermore, the *parousía* of 1 Corinthians 15:23, 51-57 **is** "the end" (1 Cor 15:24), when Death is destroyed. This exegetical reality leaves absolutely *no* room for a literal, earthly millennium.¹¹ Revelation 20:12-14 teaches that "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" after the Great White Throne Judgment. The only way to reconcile Revelation 20:12-14 with 1 Corinthians 15 is to recognize that Death is destroyed at the resurrection which occurs at Christ's *parousía* and is subsequently thrown into the lake of fire at the Final Judgment which occurs immediately after Christ's return. This interpretation, of course, does not allow for any form of premillennialism.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 15 strongly indicates that Christ's current reign in heaven *must* be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, since Christ is to relinquish the kingdom to God the Father at His *parousía*. Verses 25-26 declare that Christ "must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death." Remember that death is destroyed at the resurrection which occurs at Christ's *one-stage* Second Coming or *parousía*. This means that the end, when Christ "delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father," occurs when the Lord Jesus returns in glory at the end of the NC age. *Therefore, Christ's current reign in heaven is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.* Is such a view of 1 Corinthians 15 compatible with the stipulations of the Davidic Covenant? Or can the Davidic Covenant *only* be fulfilled in an earthly millennial reign of Christ as premillennialists claim? All forms of premillennialism teach that the Lord Jesus Christ will reign over the earth from Jerusalem after David has been resurrected. The problem with this teaching lies in the fact that it directly contradicts the terms of the Davidic Covenant! Recall that the Lord promised David, "**When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom**" (2 Sam 7:12) [**emphasis mine**]. In other words, David *has* to already be dead, for God to raise up David's Greater Son and "establish his kingdom." This is exactly why the Apostle Peter emphasizes the fact that David is dead in Acts 2 as a proof that Christ's cosmic reign at the Father's right hand fulfills the Davidic Covenant:

¹¹Most premillennialists argue that the temporal adverb *eita* (meaning "then") in the phrase "then *comes* the end" (1 Cor 15:24) signals that "the end" occurs after a literal, earthly millennium. Therefore, the crucial question regarding this particular word is whether it indicates that "the end" occurs at Christ's *parousía* or after a literal, earthly millennium. However, this particular question can only be answered by the local context in which *eita* appears. Although *eita* can signal a long interval as Premillennialists claim, the context seems to argue that Christ's *parousía* is the end. Recall that Death is destroyed in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Also recall that Death is destroyed at "the end" (1 Cor 15:24). Furthermore, since the *parousía* is the event described in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, Christ's *parousía* signals the end. Thus, the temporal adverb *eita* does not indicate a long interval.

²⁵ For David says of Him, 'I was always beholding the Lord in my presence; For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. ²⁶ Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted; Moreover my flesh also will abide in hope; ²⁷ Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. ²⁸ Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; Thou wilt make me full of gladness with Thy presence.' ²⁹ ***Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ And so, because he was a prophet, and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne, ³¹ he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. ³² This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. ³³ Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. ³⁴ For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, ³⁵ Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.' ³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified"*** [emphasis mine].

John Reisinger highlights this truth with the following words:

Further proof of this time factor can be seen in the words "while David was sleeping with the fathers." This can only mean that Christ would sit on David's throne at the *same time* that David was still "sleeping with the fathers," or *before David's resurrection*. This is why Peter deliberately mentioned that David is "both dead and buried and his sepulcher is with us unto this day." Peter is saying, "The promise to David has been fulfilled in the exact manner and precise time (how and when) as it was prophesied to David." The throne was to be established at the time of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and it would happen "while David was sleeping with his fathers" awaiting his own resurrection (1 Chronicles 17:11 and Acts 13:35, 36 for the same time reference).¹²

1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches that the *single* general resurrection occurs at the end of the NC age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *one-stage* Second Coming. This section of Scripture teaches neither a two-stage return of Christ nor a future premillennial kingdom. As a result, advocates of these two teachings cannot legitimately appeal to the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 to find support for their eschatological constructs. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *parousia*, He will resurrect and rescue His people, destroy all of His enemies, resurrect the wicked, execute the Final Judgment, abolish death once and for all, and usher in the eternal state.

[<http://ptsco.org/showcase.htm>]

¹²John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds: A Biblical Examination of the Presuppositions of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism* (Frederick: New Covenant Media, 1998), 56. Some may attempt to defeat this argument by erecting a straw man – namely, that David's throne and God's throne cannot be equated in any real sense. It is obvious that David's throne and God's throne *cannot* be equated in any real sense. However, David's throne *is* typologically analogous of God's throne, because the Davidic monarch is typologically analogous of God Himself.

It is upon this basis that the Old Testament on no less than three occasions typologically equates David's throne with Yahweh's throne. Consider King David's testimony before the princes of Israel regarding his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:5: "And of all my sons (for the LORD has given me many sons), ***He has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel***" [emphasis mine]. 1 Chronicles 29:23 also states, "Then Solomon sat on ***the throne of the LORD as king*** instead of David his father; and he prospered, and all Israel obeyed him" [emphasis mine]. Additionally, the Queen of Sheba declares to Solomon, "Blessed be the LORD your God who delighted in you, ***setting you on His throne as king for the LORD your God***; because your God loved Israel establishing them forever, therefore He made you king over them, to do justice and righteousness" (2 Chronicles 9:8) [emphasis mine].