

1. Big Picture: Why 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Matters

1 Corinthians 15 is Paul's longest sustained reflection on **resurrection**, Christ's and ours. Verses **20-28** are the theological center:

- They explain **what Christ's resurrection means** (firstfruits).
- They clarify **when and how** the final victory unfolds (order: Christ → those in Christ → the end).
- They anchor hope in the **present reign of Christ** and His future, total victory over all enemies, including death.
- They culminate in God being "**all in all**", a vision of new creation and restored communion.

For Paul, **take away bodily resurrection and you don't just lose a doctrine, you lose the gospel**. N. T. Wright often says: the early Christians **didn't** say, "We've discovered life after death," but, "God has raised Jesus from the dead; therefore, new creation has begun."

2. Literary Context: Where We Are in 1 Corinthians 15

a. Corinth's Problem

Some in Corinth were saying "**there is no resurrection of the dead**" (15:12). They weren't denying Christ's resurrection directly; more likely they were denying the idea of **bodily resurrection for believers**, influenced by Greek ideas that saw physicality as inferior.

Paul's logic:

1. If there's no resurrection of the dead → then not even Christ has been raised (vv. 13-16).
2. If Christ has not been raised → preaching is empty, faith is futile, sins remain, the dead are lost, Christians are pitied (vv. 17-19).
3. **But** Christ *has* been raised → all of that is turned on its head (v. 20).

b. Where vv. 20-28 Fit

Verses 20-28 are Paul's **positive construction** after the "what if not" section:

- vv. 20-23: *Resurrection as firstfruits and ordered sequence.*
- vv. 24-26: *The "end," Christ's reign, and death as last enemy.*
- vv. 27-28: *Scripture (Ps 8) and the final telos: God "all in all."*

This is "**resurrection-shaped eschatology**": our future, identity, and ethics are all re-formed by Christ's risen, reigning status.

3. Structure of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

You can see a clear flow:

1. **Reality declared** – “But now...” (v. 20)
2. **Pattern explained** – Adam/Christ parallel (vv. 21-22)
3. **Order described** – each in their own “turn” (v. 23)
4. **End outlined** – kingdom handed over, enemies abolished (vv. 24-26)
5. **Scripture grounded** – “He has put all things under His feet” (v. 27)
6. **Final goal** – God is “all in all” (v. 28)

It’s like concentric circles around one core claim:

Christ is risen and reigning, and His victory over death will reach its full, cosmic completion.

4. Key Greek and Linguistic Notes

v. 20 “But now Christ has been raised... firstfruits”

συνὶ δὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν, ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων.

- **συνὶ δὲ** – “But now” or “But as it is”
 - Marks a strong shift from hypothetical (“if Christ has not been raised...”) to **historical reality**.
- **ἐγήγερται** – perfect passive of *egeirō* (“has been raised”).
Perfect tense = completed act with ongoing result: He was raised, and He **remains** the Risen One.
- **ἀπαρχὴ** – *firstfruits*.
 - Cultic/agricultural term: the first portion of the harvest dedicated to God (Lev 23).
 - It’s both **representative and guarantee**. The firstfruits are of the same kind as the later harvest; they **ensure** more is coming.

Wright: Firstfruits means **resurrection has begun ahead of time in Jesus**; it’s the start of new creation, not an isolated miracle.

Theological weight:

Jesus’ resurrection is **not just proof** that resurrection is possible; it’s the **prototype and pledge** of our own.

vv. 21-22 Adam/Christ Parallel

Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ δι’ ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι’ ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν· ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται.

DEEP DIVE 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

- **δι' ἀνθρώπου** – “through a human being”
 - Through one human (Adam) came death; through another (Christ) comes resurrection.
- **ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ / ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ** – “in Adam / in Christ”
 - Corporate, covenantal language. We're not just *like* Adam; we are “**in Adam**”—under his headship as the representative of fallen humanity.
 - Likewise, believers are “**in Christ**”—under His headship as the representative of the redeemed.

Gorman / Wright: This is **participationist** and **covenantal**—we share in the story and status of the one we are “in.”

Note: “All” in each clause is governed by the sphere: *all who are in Adam* (humanity) die; *all who are in Christ* (believers) will be made alive.

v. 23 Order of Resurrection

Ἐκαστος δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι· ἀπαρχὴ Χριστός, ἔπειτα οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ·

- **τάγμα** – “order,” “rank,” “sequence.”
 - Military or ordered parade imagery.
- **ἀπαρχὴ Χριστός** – “Christ the firstfruits.”
 - He goes first.
- **ἔπειτα οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ** – “then those who belong to Christ.”
- **ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ** – “at His coming (parousia).”
 - The technical term for Christ’s royal arrival/appearing.
 - **Bird / Wright:** Parousia language has imperial resonance—like a king’s or emperor’s visit, which reorders public life.

Paul’s schema:

1. Christ’s resurrection (already happened).
2. Resurrection of those who belong to Him (future, at His parousia).
3. Then “the end” (v. 24).

v. 24 “Then the end...”

εἶτα τὸ τέλος, ὅταν παραδιδῷ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ Θεῷ καὶ Πατρὶ, ὅταν καταργήσῃ πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν.

- **τὸ τέλος** – “the end.”
 - Not annihilation, but **goal, completion** (telos).
- **παραδιδῷ τὴν βασιλείαν** – “delivers the kingdom.”
 - The Son presents the fully subdued kingdom to the Father.
- **καταργήσῃ** – “abolish, nullify, render powerless.”

DEEP DIVE 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

- Used repeatedly in this passage; it doesn't mean to obliterate existence, but to **strip power and effect**.
- **πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν** – “every rule, every authority, every power.”
 - Stock Pauline language for **cosmic powers**—not just human governments but spiritual forces (cf. Eph 1:21; Col 2:15).

Beale / Wright / McKnight: Here Paul is in line with the broader NT theme that **Christ's resurrection and exaltation spell the doom of all rival powers:** political, spiritual, and cosmic.

v. 25 “He must reign...”

δεῖ γὰρ αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν ἄχρι οὗ θῆ πάντας τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ.

- **δεῖ** – “it is necessary.”
 - Divine necessity: this is God's plan, not a possibility.
- **βασιλεύειν** – “to reign as king,” present infinitive: ongoing reign.
- **ἄχρι οὗ** – “until.”
 - Temporal limit: He reigns **until** every enemy is put under His feet.
- **θῆ... ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας** “puts [them] under His feet.”
 - Direct echo of **Psalm 110:1** and **Psalm 8:6 (LXX)**.

Intertext:

- Psalm 110:1 “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”
- Psalm 8 humanity crowned with glory and honor, all things under their feet; in the NT, this is fulfilled in Christ (cf. Heb 2:5-9).

Beale: Psalm 8 and 110 together show Jesus as the **true Human** and **Davidic King** who fulfills Adam's and Israel's calling to reign.

v. 26 “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς καταργεῖται ὁ θάνατος.

- **ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς** – “last enemy.”
 - Death is not reinterpreted here as a friend—it's explicitly named as an **enemy**.
- **καταργεῖται** - present tense (“is being abolished”) with a future sense: **destined** for nullification.
 - It's both a process underway and a guaranteed outcome.

DEEP DIVE 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Pastoral note:

Death still operates, but it does so **on a ticking clock**. It is actively being stripped of ultimate power.

vv. 27-28 “All things under His feet... God all in all”

πάντα γὰρ ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ... (Ps 8)
ὅταν δὲ ὑποταγῇ αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα, τότε καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Υἱὸς ὑποταγήσεται... ἵνα ἢ ὁ Θεὸς πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν.

- **ὑπέταξεν / ὑποταγῇ / ὑποταγήσεται** – repeated forms of “subject, place under.”
 - The Father subordinates all things under the Son.
 - All things (except the Father) come under Christ’s feet.
 - Then the Son Himself is described as being “subject” to the Father.

This can sound like a downgrade of Christ, but:

- Paul’s point is about **order and mutual glorification**, not denying Christ’s divinity.
- The Son’s “subjection” is the climax of His **mission**, He presents a fully restored creation to the Father so that **God may be “all in all.”**

“God all in all” (ὁ Θεὸς πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν)

- Not pantheism, but **God’s presence filling all things** without rival.
- A parallel to Revelation 21-22: God dwelling with His people, all things renewed.

Wright / Bird: This is the new-creation goal: God’s glory permeating every corner of reality, with no competing powers.

Eastern / theosis angle:

Some Orthodox theologians see “God all in all” as the fullest expression of **theosis**—creation fully participating in the life and love of God.

5. Intertextual Web: OT and NT Connections

You’ve already highlighted several; here’s a map for deeper study:

a. Psalm 8:4-6

Humanity crowned with glory and honor, with all things under their feet.

- **Hebrews 2:5-9** reads Psalm 8 Christologically: we don’t yet see everything subjected, but we **do** see Jesus.
- **1 Cor 15** shares this logic: not everything looks subdued yet, but Christ’s resurrection is the decisive move.

DEEP DIVE 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

b. Psalm 110:1

The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”

- The most-cited OT verse in the NT.
- Underlies Paul’s “under His feet” language and “He must reign... until” structure.

c. Genesis 1:26-28

Humanity given dominion over creation.

- Adam fails; Christ, the true image and last Adam, fulfills it.
- G.K. Beale links this to his temple theme: Christ as the true image/priest-king, ruling and extending God’s presence.

d. Daniel 7:13-14

The “Son of Man” presented to the Ancient of Days, given dominion and a kingdom.

- Strong background for the idea of **authority given** and **handing over the kingdom**.
- Wright sees this pattern everywhere in Paul’s resurrection theology- Christ’s exaltation is **royal enthronement**.

e. Philippians 2:9-11

God exalts Jesus, gives Him the name above every name; every knee bows, every tongue confesses.

- Parallel royal/eschatological vision: universal confession of Christ’s lordship.
- 1 Cor 15 and Phil 2 together: Christ’s lordship is **already true**, awaiting **final, universal acknowledgment**.

f. Revelation 1:5; 21:1-5

- Rev 1:5 Jesus as the “ruler of the kings of the earth.” Present reign.
- Rev 21:1-5 new heaven and new earth; death no more; “Behold, I am making all things new.”
 - Strong echo of 1 Cor 15’s “end” and “God all in all.”

6. Theological Themes

a. Christology: The Reigning, Representative King

DEEP DIVE 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

- **Wright / Bird / McKnight:** Christ's resurrection is **royal enthronement**. "Jesus is Lord" is not private piety; it's a public, cosmic claim.
- The Adam/Christ theme (vv. 21–22) means Jesus is the **true human**, fulfilling the vocation of image-bearer.

b. Eschatology: Already/Not Yet, Not Escape but Renewal

- Christ reigns **now**, but not all enemies are visibly defeated.
- **Beale:** this explains the tension between Christ's current session at God's right hand and ongoing suffering.
- **Wright:** resurrection points to **new creation**, not escape from creation.

c. Participation and Ethics

- **Gorman:** believers share in Christ's story—crucifixion, resurrection, and future glory. Our ethics (steadfastness, holiness) flow out of this participatory identity.
- The final verse of the chapter (v. 58) makes it clear: resurrection hope leads to **persevering work**, not passivity.

d. Powers and Principalities

- The "every rule and authority and power" language (v. 24) fits Paul's worldview of **spiritual + structural powers** (cf. Eph 3:10, Col 2:15).
- **Bates** would underline that Christ's rule demands **allegiance**—loyal obedience—to this risen King over all competing lords.

7. Reflection Prompts for Deeper Study

1. **Trace the Adam/Christ theme** by reading Romans 5:12–21 alongside 1 Cor 15:20–22. How does Paul see Christ undoing and surpassing Adam's failure?
2. **Compare Psalm 8 → Hebrews 2 → 1 Corinthians 15.** How does your view of "human calling" change when you see it fulfilled in Christ?
3. **Pray through "God all in all."** What would it mean for God's presence and rule to fill every part of your life? Your church? Your city?
4. **Name "enemies" in your own experience** (sin, fear, injustice). How does it change your perspective to see them as enemies Christ is already in the process of subduing?
5. **Reflect on v. 58 in light of 20–28.** Make a list of "labors in the Lord" that you're tempted to think are in vain. Imagine them in the light of resurrection and new creation.