

# 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

## Deep Study Guide: Context, Language, Intertext, Theology

### 1) Literary and Pastoral Context

#### Where we are in 1 Corinthians

By the time Paul reaches chapter 15, he has already confronted a string of “good church / bad idea” problems:

- **Factional identity** and prestige (chs. 1-4)
- **Sexual immorality tolerated** and the church’s witness damaged (ch. 5)
- **Body-matters ethics** and slogans like “all things are lawful” (chs. 6-7)
- **Knowledge without love** (ch. 8)
- **Worship, gifts, and status** (chs. 11-14)

Chapter 15 functions as **load-bearing theology**. It’s not “Paul’s random afterlife chapter.” It is the eschatological foundation underneath everything else: if resurrection is negotiable, then holiness, unity, love, embodied faithfulness, and costly discipleship become negotiable too.

Scholars like **Gordon Fee** and **Anthony Thiselton** repeatedly emphasize that Paul’s ethics and ecclesiology (church life) in 1 Corinthians are inseparable from his eschatology (where the story is going). Resurrection isn’t a detachable belief; it’s the engine.

#### Immediate context in chapter 15

Paul begins with the **gospel tradition** (15:1-11): Christ died, was buried, was raised, appeared. Then he turns in 15:12-19 to a **reductio ad absurdum**: “If you deny resurrection, follow the logic to the end.” Then comes the great reversal: “**But now / but in fact**” (15:20), which launches the Adam/Christ argument and the full vision of resurrection life (15:21-58).

### 2) Historical Background: Why deny resurrection?

#### Greco-Roman plausibility structures

Many in the Greco-Roman world assumed some version of:

- the **soul** is the “real self”
- the **body** is disposable, temporary, even a burden

- death can be framed as release

That doesn't mean every Corinthian was a Platonist, but resurrection often sounded like a **category mistake**. It could seem backward: "Why would you want the body again?"

This is where **N. T. Wright** is especially helpful: in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, he argues that **bodily resurrection** is distinctively **Jewish** in shape (even amid variety) and sharply different from Greek "immortality of the soul" talk. Early Christians are not merely claiming "life after death," but "life after life after death": a renewed embodied life in God's new world.

### Corinthian "over-realized spirituality"

Within 1 Corinthians itself, you see signs of a church tempted to treat spiritual status as present possession:

- They're impressed by **wisdom/rhetoric** (chs. 1-2)
- They behave as if already "rich," already "reigning" (4:8)
- They treat bodily life casually in some areas (chs. 5-7)
- They reduce ethics to slogans (e.g., "all things are lawful")

That kind of atmosphere is fertile soil for spiritualizing resurrection: "Sure, Christ is 'raised,' but that's spiritual, bodies don't rise."

Paul refuses that compromise.

## 3) The Structure of Paul's Argument (15:12-20)

This paragraph is almost mathematically constructed:

1. **v.12** The contradiction exposed: Christ raised is proclaimed, yet some deny resurrection.
2. **vv.13-15** The gospel collapses logically: no resurrection → Christ not raised → preaching empty → apostles false witnesses.
3. **vv.16-18** Salvation collapses personally: faith futile → still in sins → dead believers perished.
4. **v.19** Hope collapses existentially: Christians most to be pitied.
5. **v.20** The reversal and foundation: **But in fact Christ has been raised**, firstfruits.

It's important homiletically that Paul does not first argue, "Resurrection is encouraging." He argues, "Resurrection is *necessary*; deny it and you destroy everything."

## 4) Greek Texture and Key Terms

**v.12 "is proclaimed" and "has been raised"**

- **κηρύσσεται (kērussetai)** “is proclaimed/heralded”  
This is public announcement language. Resurrection belongs to the church’s **kerygma** (core proclamation), not its optional theories.
- **ἐγήγερται (egēgertai)** “has been raised” (perfect tense)  
Perfect tense often carries “past action with ongoing result.” The raised Christ is not merely a past event; it is a present reality.

## vv.14, 17 “empty” and “futile”

Paul uses two overlapping but distinct words:

- **κενός (kenos)** empty, hollow (v.14)  
Think “contentless,” without substance.
- **ματαιία (mataia)** futile, ineffective (v.17)  
Think “non-functioning,” unable to deliver what it promises.

A helpful way to put it:

- Without resurrection, preaching is **empty** (it has no real referent).
- Without resurrection, faith is **futile** (it cannot save, cannot hold).

## v.15 “false witnesses”

- **ψευδομάρτυρες (pseudomartyres)** false witnesses  
Courtroom category. Paul is saying Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of testimony about God’s action in history. **Richard Hays** often highlights how Paul binds theology to testimony and communal practice, ie, truth claims are not ornamental.

## v.17 “still in your sins”

- **ἔτι ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις (eti en tais hamartiais)** “still in your sins”

This is one of the most theologically dense statements in the paragraph. It implies resurrection isn’t merely “proof the cross worked,” but part of how salvation works.

Scholars debate emphasis here, but several compatible strands emerge:

1. **Vindication/validation:** resurrection publicly vindicates the crucified Messiah (a strong Wright theme).
2. **Defeat of sin’s dominion:** sin and death are intertwined powers; if death still rules, sin still rules (Romans 6 logic).
3. **Unified saving event:** cross and resurrection are inseparable movements within one saving act (Thiselton and others).

In short: resurrection is not a theological accessory, it's integral to how the gospel delivers liberation from sin and death.

### v.18 “fallen asleep... perished”

- κοιμηθέντες (*koimēthentes*) those who “fell asleep” (Christian euphemism for death)
- ἀπόλοντο (*apolonto*) perished, ruined, lost

This is not merely emotional loss. Paul means **eschatological loss** if Christ is not raised.

### v.20 “But now... firstfruits”

- νυνὶ δὲ (*nyni de*) “But now / But as it is”  
A decisive rhetorical pivot.
- ἀπαρχή (*aparchē*) firstfruits  
Not “first example,” but “first portion of the harvest that guarantees the rest.”

## 5) Intertextual Connections

### A) Firstfruits: Leviticus 23 and covenant harvest logic

**Leviticus 23:9-14** describes Israel bringing the first sheaf of the harvest to God. This is not merely symbolic; it's consecratory and anticipatory: the first portion signifies and guarantees the coming harvest.

Paul's point: Christ's resurrection is the first sheaf. The rest of the harvest is those who belong to him. This is why “firstfruits” immediately opens into Adam/Christ (15:21-22): the story is corporate and representative.

### B) Daniel 12 and Jewish resurrection hope

**Daniel 12:2** (“many who sleep in the dust... shall awake”) forms a backbone of Jewish resurrection expectation: God will set the world right, including bodily life.

Wright's contribution is crucial here: Jewish resurrection isn't “going to heaven when you die,” but **God's future renewal**. Paul is proclaiming that renewal has begun in Jesus.

### C) Isaiah 25:6–9: death swallowed up

**Isaiah 25:8** (“He will swallow up death forever”) sits behind the NT's resurrection imagination, and Paul later echoes it directly in 1 Cor 15:54. Even though the preaching text ends at v.20, the chapter's climax shows that Paul is thinking in Isaiah's horizon: God defeats death as part of his saving reign.

## D) Psalmic vindication patterns

Early Christian preaching often reads resurrection as divine vindication (Acts uses Psalm 16 in this way). Paul doesn't cite it explicitly here, but the logic of resurrection as God's verdict on Jesus, and thus on the cross, is consistent with the broader apostolic pattern.

## 6) Interpretive Options for the Corinthian Error

What exactly are "some of you" claiming (v.12)?

### Option 1: They deny the general resurrection but accept Christ's resurrection

This is the most straightforward reading of Paul's rhetoric: they want to keep "Christ raised" while denying "the dead are raised." Paul argues the category cannot be separated from the event.

**Strength:** fits Paul's conditional argument.

**Weakness:** doesn't explain *why* they'd make that split (but cultural pressures can).

### Option 2: They accept resurrection language but spiritualize its meaning

This is the pastoral-likely background: "resurrection" becomes metaphor for spiritual enlightenment or ongoing influence.

**Strength:** fits Corinth's "wisdom" pressure and bodily-minimizing tendencies.

**Weakness:** Paul speaks as though they've made a proposition ("there is no resurrection of the dead"), not merely changed definitions, but that proposition could be the result of redefining.

### Option 3: A subset rejects resurrection entirely

Possible, but less likely if the church still "proclaims Christ raised" as a known shared claim.

Most interpreters blend 1 and 2: a denial of future bodily resurrection fueled by a cultural and spiritualizing plausibility structure.

## 7) What Paul is really protecting

### 1) The gospel as public truth, not private therapy

Paul's focus on preaching, testimony, and false witness means Christianity is not essentially a set of inner spiritual benefits. It is a proclamation about what God has done.

### 2) Salvation as deliverance from sin-and-death powers

“Still in your sins” signals a robust soteriology. Sin is not merely bad behavior; it is a power with death as its partner. Resurrection means the power has been broken and the new age has begun.

### **3) Resurrection as new creation within space, time, and history**

This emphasis is deeply Pauline: resurrection is not escape from creation but renewal of creation. It is the birth of new creation in history, not merely a metaphysical promise.

This dovetails well with **Michael Gorman’s** participationist/cross-shaped framework: believers participate in the life of the crucified-and-risen Christ. Resurrection life is not only future; it is a present participation that reshapes embodied discipleship.

## **8) “Embodied New Creation” implications (anchored in the text)**

Even though Paul will later draw explicit ethical conclusions (15:58), the logic is already implied:

- If resurrection is bodily, bodies matter now (cf. 1 Cor 6).
- If resurrection is historical, discipleship is not merely inward but lived publicly.
- If resurrection is the firstfruits of a harvest, the church is a preview community of that future.

This also helps tie the whole letter together: the church’s unity, holiness, love, and mutual care are resurrection-shaped practices because they are practices of the coming age breaking into the present.