

“But in Fact . . .”

I Corinthians 15:20-28

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. - I Corinthians 15:20-28, ESV

But in fact (But now) . . . Words of Powerful Hope

The Apostle Paul clearly loved the Gospel, and he loved the surprising turn of reality the Gospel brought. Perhaps it was his own dramatic conversion from a Christ-hating, church-persecuting opponent of the Gospel to suddenly and dramatically being confronted by the Lord Jesus Himself and made into an Apostle of the very Gospel he had been violently trying to stamp out. Whatever the reason, the Apostle Paul delights in telling the story of how the Gospel changes everything.

One of his favorite ways to do this in writing is by the use of two little words, “But now.” In Greek, these are the two words that begin verse 20: “But now Christ has been raised from the dead.” The sense the word “now” carries is to say “in fact,” which is why the ESV translates it that way, but many other translations leave the “But now” that more directly translates the original Greek.

It’s a fascinating study to see how the Apostle Paul uses this phrase “But now” in his writing, almost always to introduce a dramatic Gospel turn-of-events. Here are a few great examples:

In Romans 1-3, Paul lays out the bad news of God’s wrath against human sin and how all people are thoroughly sinful and have sinned so much and fall under God’s judgement and have no hope of being justified before God on the basis of the Law, which condemns us. Listen to **Romans 3:20-22:**

by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for ^[b]through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe (ESV)

And then **Romans 7:5-6:**

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (ESV)

Ephesians 2:12-13:

remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (ESV)

Ephesians 5:8:

you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light

Here in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul has been telling us how utterly hopeless and pathetic we would be if there were no resurrection from the dead:

1. The preaching of the Gospel would be empty and meaningless
2. Faith in the Gospel would be empty and meaningless
3. The witness of the Apostles would be fraudulent
4. We would still be in our sin, under God's condemnation
5. Lost loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ would have truly perished
6. We would be the most pathetic of all people, because we would have placed all our hopes and expectations in a lie.

Thankfully, none of that is true, because "But now, But in fact, Christ has risen from the dead." He has now, in fact defeated death and overthrown its tyrannical reign over the people of God.

I. Two Vitally Connected Truths, v. 20

Christ the firstfruits

But Paul says more than just the glorious fact that Christ has risen from the dead. He has risen as the firstfruits: "*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*"

In the Mosaic Law given by God to His people, the firstfruits of everything were holy to the Lord. Within a few days of Passover, the Feast of Firstfruits would be the time to present the very first crops of the new season to the Lord. The first harvest of every crop, the firstborn of every flock and herd, the firstborn sons of every family, were all holy to the Lord and were either presented to the Lord in sacrifice or redeemed back from the Lord by sacrifice.

The offering of the firstfruits was an act of faith, giving to the Lord the first and trusting Him to provide the rest of the harvest or the flock.

Jesus rose again, holy to the Lord, as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. He is the firstborn from the dead, according to both Colossians 1 and Revelation 1. He offered Himself up in sacrifice on the cross to redeem all of God's own and then, after He was raised from the dead, never to die again, He was taken up into heaven by God the Father.

Other people had been returned to life by the Lord in the Scriptures, but they all were raised only to die again. Jesus was and is the firstborn from the dead and the firstfruits of the resurrection in an undying, glorious, victorious way. But the terms "firstfruits" and "firstborn" are a call to us to have faith and trust God for the rest of the harvest from death into eternal life, to trust God for the rest of the family to be born again into eternal life, first spiritually and then physically.

Jesus the Firstfruits, the Firstborn, redeemed all of His own and sits now in heaven, presented before the throne of God, as the guarantee that all who are His will rise in Him, that the harvest will be complete, the family table will be full, the whole flock will be gathered in with no loss.

II. Two Eternally Important Men, v. 21-22

For as in Adam . . . so also in Christ . . .

Paul then tells us how it is that Jesus can be not just resurrected Himself, but the firstfruits of all those who have fallen asleep in Him, the firstborn from the dead:

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (v. 21-22, ESV)

One man, Adam, brought sin upon all men, because all men were counted as in Adam, the head of the human race, when he sinned. Thus, his sin was our sin.

Listen to how Paul more gloriously unpacks this doctrine in Romans 5:12-21:

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— ¹³ for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
— Romans 5:12-21, ESV

The biblical concept of what is often called “federal headship” is an important truth to grasp. Just like in the battle between David and Goliath, David represented all of the Israelites and Goliath represented all of the Philistines, so Adam wasn’t just the first human being created by God; he was also our representative before God in the Garden of Eden, and he represented all of us when he failed and sinned. Now, you might think that’s not fair, but the fact is that none of us would have done any better than Adam if we had been in his place. He sinned, just like we would have, and he failed all of humanity when he did, as death became the reality for all people ever since. Adam died judicially and spiritually and began to die physically as soon as he sinned against God.

What is truly and monumentally unfair is that Jesus the sinless Son of God faithfully obeyed His Father His whole life, passing every test, resisting every temptation, and then He went to the cross anyway and laid down His life as an offering, as the spotless Lamb of God in our place, that we might be counted righteous in Him and that by His one act of righteousness we might have justification and life forever.

Jesus not only brought forgiveness and justification, but His glorious resurrection secured life for all who are in Him. Just as all who are in Adam die because of His sin, so all who are in Christ live forever because of His obedience and victory.

III. One Coming, Glorious Day, vv. 23-24

. . . then, at His coming . . .

But when will this happen? When will we share in His glorious eternal life? Well, Paul tells us that everything must happen in due order:

But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. (vv. 23-24, ESV)

It is when Christ comes again that all those who belong to Him will be raised. Paul tells us more about how this will happen in I Thessalonians 4:13-17 –

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (ESV)

As the Lord Jesus is descending from heaven to judge the living and the dead, the dead in Christ will be gloriously resurrected and will meet Him in the air as He comes. Then, after He steps foot on earth, the earth will split and all of the dead will rise to be judged by Him.

The general resurrection of all the dead is told to us in Revelation 20:11-13 –

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (ESV)

In Acts 24, Paul stood on trial before Governor Felix, and he testified to his faith in the coming resurrection of all people:

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. (Acts 24:14-15, ESV)

When Paul speaks of “these men themselves,” he’s referring to the Pharisees who are accusing him. Paul himself used to be a Pharisee. Now, where would the Pharisees who were not believers in Jesus get a faith in the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world?

Well, Daniel 12:2 refers to this.

Here’s Daniel 12:1-4:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end.”

It’s clear that this resurrection comes at the end of the world, and so the Pharisees believed it. When Daniel says “*many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,*” the Hebrew could literally be translated as “*the multitude of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake.*”

So, in the end, the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t just secure the resurrection of His own. It does, and His own are raised to everlasting life. But everyone else is also raised from the dead, and they are judged by God according to what they have done, and they live forever in everlasting shame and contempt.

But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. Here in Daniel 12, again in Malachi 4, and then again in Revelation, we’re told that those whose names are written in the Lord’s Book – the Book of Remembrance which Revelation calls The Lamb’s Book of Life – will be welcomed into everlasting life and joy. These are those who trust in Jesus for salvation and who belong to God through faith in Christ. Is that you?

The rest of humanity is judged and condemned by their own recorded words and deeds.

IV. One Glorious Reign Over All Enemies, vv. 25-26

For he must reign . . .

Jesus’ coming again in glory and raising His and judging all the world is the consummating act of His glorious reign, which began when He ascended into heaven and was seated at the Right Hand of the Majesty on High:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Jesus is reigning now, in heaven at the Father’s right hand, as the exalted and glorious King of kings. But His reign is veiled to the world. He is right now putting His enemies under His feet as His Gospel

advances in the world. Right now, during this Gospel Age, many enemies, like the Apostle Paul, are brought into His kingdom by His loving grace. As we His people proclaim the Gospel, advance His mission in the world, plant churches, and reach unreached peoples, the King is reigning and advancing His Gospel Kingdom of Grace over His enemies by making them into His beloved subjects by His saving grace.

When the Gospel has reached to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, and King Jesus has brought in all His own sheep into His sheepfold, has subjected by the Gospel of Grace all who will be saved, then He will come again and defeat His remaining enemies, with the sword of judgment from His mouth, as Revelation pictures it. This will be the final consummation of the kingdom.

Death is the last enemy to be destroyed.

In Revelation 20, right after we read “*Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.*” John goes on to tell us “*Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*” – vv. 14-15, ESV

As soon as Death and Hades give up their dead because Jesus calls them to do so – Remember, He has the keys! – then Death and Hades themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. Death dies.

John Donne celebrates the death of death in his Holy Sonnet 10, –

Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud
BY JOHN DONNE

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

V. One Eternal Glorious Reality, vv. 27-28

. . . that God may be all in all

Then what? Well, then we enter into one eternal glorious reality:

For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. – vv. 27-28, ESV

Jesus, as the Son of God and our Messiah, will present His completed and consummated kingdom to God the Father, and Jesus will reign forever as our Messiah under His Father, so that God may be all in all.

This expression “that God may be all in all” is not a reference to some mystical absorption into the divine essence, but it is rather a wonderful summary of the reality that will be forever when we live in the unveiled presence of God and God is truly glorified in all we do, say, and think. We are meant to live all of life before the presence of God and to the glory of God, but our sin keeps us from doing this. In the end, God will be in our midst, in His unveiled glory, and we will lovingly, openly, joyfully, and perfectly do all things to His glory, delighting ourselves in Him. And THAT will be glory and paradise and heaven indeed! Forever!