

# THEN COMES THE END

by Ray C. Stedman

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The 100th anniversary of the birth of Albert Einstein, the great man whose theories of the makeup of the universe revolutionized science, was celebrated last month. The concepts he envisioned have changed the whole modern world, opening new vistas of thought that no one ever explored before him. Now, in a far greater way, this is what the resurrection of Jesus has done, as the Apostle Paul is exploring it in this 15th chapter of First Corinthians. This one Man's breakthrough, shattering the death barrier and transforming existence for all who follow him, has changed the history of the world many, many times.

In this chapter, the apostle has defined the resurrection as an integral part of the "good news," it is something we rest our faith upon. He supported this with the testimony of eye witnesses, giving a list of those who saw Jesus alive after his death; and then he described what life would be like without the resurrection.

Beginning with Verse 20, we now come to a section where the apostle's thoughts sweep across the centuries to declare the ultimate effects in history of the resurrection of Jesus. There are three remarkable things about the resurrection, he says:

The first one is to guarantee the physical resurrection of the bodies of all who believe in Jesus; our resurrection is tied in with his.

**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 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. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. {1 Cor 15:20-23 RSV}**

The key to that passage is the twice repeated word, "first fruits." Paul is referring here to the ritual that was given to Israel in the 23rd chapter of the book of Leviticus, where on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which followed the Passover, on the morrow after the Sabbath, there would be the offering of the first fruits of the barley harvest. The Jews were commanded to bring a sheaf of grain, the first of the harvest, to the priest, who would wave it before the Lord.

Now if you have been carefully following the chronology of Scripture, you know that was the exact morning of our Lord's resurrection. There, in the feasts of Israel, you have a prediction that the resurrection of Jesus would be the first fruits of the harvest. Paul's argument is that not only did Jesus rise from the dead on the exact day predicted by the ritual, but, furthermore, his resurrection is a sample and a guarantee of the entire "harvest" of resurrection, which would include ours as well.

It is important for us to understand that Jesus was the first human being ever to be resurrected from the dead. Well, someone says, what about Lazarus, and some of the Old Testament stories of people being raised from the dead? Yes, there were people who returned from the dead, but they were not resurrected. It is very important to understand this, because resurrection means more than merely coming back to life. We are familiar today with books that tell the stories of people who have "died" and had certain experiences, and then "come back to life" to tell us about them. Sometimes the term "resurrection" has been used in those stories, but that is not resurrection. The proper term would be "resuscitation" if it is true that they have "come back," because they come back to the same life they left. But resurrection does not do that.

Resurrection brings us to a quality and a dimension of life we have never lived before. It is not simply a return to existence as we know it now; it is a lifting to a higher, more free, more marvelous dimension of existence than we have ever known. Jesus was the first one, therefore, to be resurrected from the dead. It was the same Jesus, he came in the same body, but he came back to a different level of life. So Paul says that Jesus'

resurrection is a sample of ours.

He then goes on to argue that it is absolutely certain that this will happen. This is the way he puts it: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead." Death passed upon our race because of the fall of Adam, so all who are part of the new creation, the new race in Christ, shall also participate in the resurrection of the dead. As Paul says, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Now he is talking about believers, those who have already fallen asleep in Christ. In Verse 18 he says, "Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ ..."; in Verse 20 he speaks of "those who have fallen asleep"; and in Verse 23, "those who belong to Christ." So when he says, "in Adam all die," he is not talking about the unbelieving world, although it is true that they all die in Adam, but he is talking particularly about believers. Believers die because, as far as their bodies are concerned, they are part of the race of Adam, and that is why we are not caught up into glory immediately. But, also, we are "in Christ," and those "in Christ shall all be made alive." This is his argument. By man came the breakout from Eden; by man came also the breakthrough back into Paradise, by means of resurrection. What he is really saying then is that resurrection is just as certain as death.

It is a rather sobering thing to realize that we are all dying this morning. We begin to die the moment we are born, and the process keeps going on relentlessly. Though we can cover up the outward appearances for a while, the inward decay cannot be arrested; we are all headed for death. There was an epitaph written on a tombstone once that said:

Remember, friend, as you pass by,  
As you are now, so once was I.  
As I am now, soon you will be,  
Prepare for death, and follow me.

Some wag had written underneath it:

To follow you I'm not content,  
Until I know which way you went.

Content or not, that is the way we are going to go. Paul is arguing very strongly here, "... as in Adam all die." That is certain. You do not have to do anything; you do not have to work at it, although some of you do. Let time take its course and it will happen, because it is not up to you to die.

Now, with equal certainty, here is the good news. It is not up to you to be resurrected, but it will happen. Just as surely as death is at work in us in Adam, so life is at work in us in Christ, if we are "in Christ." Therefore, it is just as certain as death that we shall be resurrected again from the dead and brought into a quality and level of life that we have never known before. Now that is a wonderfully encouraging thought. The apostle puts it in the strongest terms possible. Even the dead are resurrected. There is a resurrection of both the just and the unjust, we are taught in other Scriptures, but the "resurrection to life" {cf, John 5:28-29} involves only those who are "in Christ." The apostle makes that very clear.

When will it happen? Paul answers that great question in Verse 23:

**But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. {1 Cor 15:23 RSV}**

There is the answer: "at his coming." This agrees with other passages in Scripture where the apostle says there will be some who will never die. I just said that death is at work in all of us, and it is, but nevertheless, for at least one generation there will be some who will never die. Paul describes this in First Thessalonians 4:16-17:

**For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. {1 Th 4:16-17 KJV}**

So there are some who will never die, even though death is at work in them. For nineteen hundred years, every generation has hoped that it would be the one that would be alive when Christ returned. That hope blazes high in many hearts now because of the things that are taking place in the world today. We see the nations gathering in what looks like may well be the final arrangement before the Lord returns. No one can say for certain. It may all fold back, and flow back again into other relationships. So, for nineteen hundred years, all those who expected to escape death by the return of Christ have been disappointed. Ultimately they had to lay down their burdens, and in that strange, mysterious experience that we call death, pass into glory through the gates of death.

Well, what about them? When are they resurrected? The answer again is, "at his coming." Now because of that, many have felt that people who die before the coming of the Lord either lie asleep in the grave until he comes, or they drift around in a disembodied state. (Some have even suggested that perhaps God gives them a kind of a temporary body, a sort of a "heavenly bathrobe" to wait for until their good clothes get back from the cleaners.) But I think this is to misread what the Scriptures are saying. It is my understanding that there is a difference between time, in which we now live, and eternity, which is a different kind of existence. Eternity has no past or no future as time does. If we understand that difference, then we can see from many Scriptures that when a believer lays down his life here and steps out of time into eternity, the first event to await him is the coming of the Lord for his own, and, therefore, the resurrection of his own body. So there is no waiting for those who go to be with the Lord. Now I do not have time to go into that more fully.

(If you want a little more explanation of that, I would suggest the chapter, "Time and Eternity," in the book I have written, *Authentic Christianity*, which goes into that more at length. I believe that it is the explanation of many baffling and difficult passages in the Scriptures. It has given great hope and anticipation to my own life to see, in those terms, that when we step out of time into eternity, the first event which we face is that wonderful moment when "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.")

Beginning in Verse 24, the apostle moves on to that final scene, to the time when Christ has returned into time and reigned already for 1,000 years of millennial peace and righteousness on the earth. He will have completed his work, subdued his enemies, cast the devil and death and Hades into the lake of fire (as we read in the book of Revelation), and then delivered the kingdom back to the Father. This is what Paul now describes:

**Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. {1 Cor 15:24-26 RSV}**

Notice something there: The reign of Christ does not begin after he subdues his enemies, although we often think of it that way. There is a great hymn by Isaac Watts that goes:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run,  
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,  
'Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

That is all couched in the future tense, Jesus shall reign, but the Biblical truth is he does reign, and he shall continue to reign until his enemies are made his footstool. I do not know anything that has more power to steady us in times of pressure, and undergird us in times of discouragement, defeat, and oppression than the realization that Jesus now reigns. He is in control *now*. When we run up against oppressive governments and severe limitations to our freedom and outright, violent persecution of Christian faith, we are to remember that all this takes place under the overall authority of Jesus Christ who said, when he rose from the dead, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," {Matt 28:18 KJV}. He permits this kind of thing to happen to accomplish his purposes, just as, in the Old Testament, God raised up the Babylonians and the Assyrians and brought them against Israel. He allowed Jerusalem to be taken; he allowed the Israelites to be taken into captivity, not because that was the way he wanted things to happen on earth, but because that was necessary to teach his people the lessons they needed to know. God brings these things to pass for our sake, and it is part of the authority of Christ that allows them to happen. That is a very important truth that we often forget.

Now the apostle says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." This can be seen to be true in both an individual and a universal sense. Universally, death is never going to disappear from this earth until we come to that moment, described in the book of Revelation, when a new heaven and a new earth come into existence. In this present heaven and earth death reigns and will continue to do so even during the millennium, even during the time when Christ personally rules on earth, as I believe he will, and peace and righteousness prevail all over the earth. Nevertheless, death is present. The prophet Isaiah says, "the child shall die a hundred years old," {Isa 65:20 RSV}. He means that death will be an unusual experience during the millennium, when someone one hundred years old will still be a mere child as far as the possibilities of his life are concerned -- he could go on and live the entire thousand years. But death is still present, and it is not until the end, when our Lord subdues his enemies, that death is finally destroyed and cast into the lake of fire. Therefore, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

But there is a sense in which this is individually true of us right now. What is going on in your life and mine now? Well, we are experiencing a continual reciprocation of death, out of which comes life. We are all fighting battles, struggles in which at times we fail, falter, and are overcome. We give way to worry, we give way to impatience, anger, malice, and lust. Sometimes we struggle against these things with great effort; other times we give in quickly. But we are all engaged in a great battle in which we are assaulted continually with temptations to yield and to fall into death. Yet, even out of those times of failure, by the grace of God's forgiveness we are restored. Life is handed back to us, in a sense, and we go on to walk for a longer time without failure, until gradually we gain victory over evil habits and evil attitudes. Life, therefore, is a continual experience of life coming out of death, of pain leading to joy, and that will never end as long as we are in this present life.

But there is coming a time when this body will die, and death then is destroyed for us. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Once we pass through the experience of death into resurrection, like our Lord himself, we shall never die again; that is the wonderful statement. Christ having once died, Paul says in Romans, never dies again, and we share his existence. He is the first fruits of the great harvest of which we are a part.

In Verses 27-28 there is a description of this end Paul speaks of when the kingdom is restored to God the Father:

**"For God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says "All things are put in subjection under him," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one. {1 Cor 15:27-28 RSV}**

Here is the description of the end of Christ's work as a mediator between God and man. During this present time, our Lord Jesus is singled out, as it were, from the persons of the Godhead as the supreme object of worship, and we are invited to worship him and give honor to him. Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that, because of our Lord's faithfulness,

**God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {cf, Phil 2:9-11 RSV}**

So to worship Christ honors God. In that great scene in Revelation 5, the whole universe gathers about the throne worshipping the Lamb that was slain, crying, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing," {Rev 5:12 KJV}. Everyone is invited to worship the Son.

But there is coming a time, Paul says, when the work of the Son in subduing a lost creation will be finished. When the full results of the atonement of the cross have been completed and all the harvest of the earth is gathered, then, according to this account, the Lord Jesus returns the kingdom to the Father in order that "God [the three-fold God, Father, Son, and Spirit] may be everything to every one."

What this means is that then, for the first time in our experience, we will understand emotionally the mystery of the Trinity. We now know the Bible teaches that there are three persons in the Godhead, that they are equal in glory and honor, and that they somehow coalesce so that there are three persons but only one God. Intellectually we can grasp that; emotionally I do not think anyone does. But there is coming a day when we will thoroughly understand, emotionally, the makeup of God, and we will understand the great truth God has been seeking to teach us all through this earthly experience that he is all we need, that God is everything to every one.

I often talk with people who are having struggles in their Christian lives, and almost invariably I find their struggles come from an unwillingness to believe that God can supply what they need. They feel that somehow they have to lean upon human beings to get what they need, and that if they are denied what they feel they need, life is hardly worth the living. But God continually works at us to show us that is not true. He is all we need. He knows we need bread and food and shelter, etc. This is our Lord's argument in the Sermon on the Mount, "Your Father knows that you have need of all these things. Do you think he is unable to supply them to you? If he can feed the birds of the air and clothe the lilies of the field do you think he cannot find some way to meet your need as well?" {cf, Matt 6:26-28} he argues. It is a constant rebuke to our little faith that we do not trust God and believe that if we obey him and walk with him he will give us all we need. This is the struggle. But the mark of maturity, the mark that indicates that man has come into his own, has fulfilled his purpose, is the time when he understands with all his heart and mind and soul that God is everything to every one. After that the mediation of our Lord is no longer required. God the Triune God. is everything to every one.

Now there is a third remarkable characteristic of the resurrection. In the next section, from Verses 29-34, the apostle brings out the motivating power of the resurrection.

He starts with this puzzling verse,

**Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? {1 Cor 15:29 RSV}**

The Mormon church bases a major part of their religious activity on this one verse. Unless you are a "good" Mormon you are not permitted to enter one of their temples. People ask, what goes on in them? Well, one of the things is that they are being baptized on behalf of the dead. The Mormons believe that you can go back through history and be baptized for all your ancestors. That is why they put great reliance upon genealogical tables and spend a lot of time tracing their ancestry, because they believe they can be baptized on their behalf and thus save them. I met a woman once who said that she had saved more people than Jesus Christ because she had been baptized for so many thousands of people! Some Mormons pick out the well-known figures of history and are baptized for Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, etc., all based on this one verse; there is no other reference in the Bible to being baptized on behalf of the dead.

Well, what does this verse mean? I do not know. It evidently refers to some form of proxy baptism, but it is noteworthy that the apostle does not refer to it as though it was something that the Christians in Corinth practiced, because he puts it in the third person: "Otherwise what do 'people' mean" (not what do "we" mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead), but what do "they" mean, that is literally what he says. "If the dead are not raised at all, why are 'they' baptized on their behalf?" He returns to the first person in the next verse, so that it is clear it is some practice that some people were engaged in that he does not necessarily approve of or disapprove of. He simply refers to it as a practice. It would be a shame to miss the significance of the point he is making because we do not understand what that practice he refers to was.

The point is this: Something was motivating people to take this action; something had a powerful effect upon them, and they so strongly were moved by it that they actually went out of their way to be baptized on behalf of someone who had died. Now perhaps it was a case where some people had died without being able to be baptized; they had become Christians by faith, but they had not had an opportunity to be baptized before they died. So some were adopting the practice of being baptized on their behalf, out of a kind of superstitious idea that you could not enter heaven unless you were baptized. Lots of people have that idea yet. Whatever it was, the apostle is arguing that the belief in a resurrection has a profound motivating force upon our lives, and it will

make us do things to help others. Now he is not arguing that this is proof of the resurrection, because many people believe in things that do not really exist and their belief does not prove that such things exist. (You can believe in Santa Claus but that does not mean he really exists.) What he is saying is that believing in the resurrection has a great effect upon you. It will change your life. It will make you do things that you would not otherwise do, and one of the things is that you will be concerned about the salvation of others.

He has a similar effect in Verse 30 on through 32 concerning himself:

**Why am I in peril every hour? I protest, brethren, by my pride in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? {1 Cor 15:30-32a RSV}**

That is a reference to persecution he endured that we know very little about. There is another verse in the Second Corinthians letter that probably refers to the same thing. In Chapter 1, Verses 8-9, he says:

**For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death: but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; {2 Cor 1:8-9 RSV}**

That is the point. To believe that God raises the dead is a tremendous encouragement to endure suffering and even physical affliction now. The fact that the apostle understood this enabled him to bear up in a time of great physical pressure, when, as he put it, I think figuratively, he "fought with beasts at Ephesus." It was almost like going into the arena to fight wild beasts. I do not think he actually did that, because he was a Roman citizen and no Roman citizen could be compelled to fight in the arena with wild beasts or gladiators. But, in a figurative way, this is what he went through, and he says the hope of the resurrection strengthened him.

Are you, perhaps, wearing out your life in some obscure corner? Do you think you will never be heard of, that nobody will ever know the punishment you have had to take? Well, have no fear. Paul says this "light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," {2 Cor 4:17 KJV}. The resurrection is the ample recompense for all human suffering, no matter how bad it maybe.

He closes this section with an appeal to let the hope of resurrection determine your life style:

**If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." {1 Cor 15:32b RSV}**

That was the philosophy of Epicureanism in that day, and it is widespread today. "Live it up. Get it all now. Don't bother with giving yourself and wasting your time on doing things for God. Enjoy yourself. Spend all your free time having fun and pleasure." But, he says:

**Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." Come to your right mind, [that is, be realistic] and sin no more. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. {1 Cor 15:33-34 RSV}**

What was happening in Corinth is what is happening in California.

Many Christians there were giving way to this "live it up" philosophy. Instead of making themselves available to spread the word of truth, instead of giving themselves to the Spirit of God to be used in ways that would plant the seed of righteousness and love and truth in areas where people were hurting and suffering, they were giving way to the idea, "Enjoy yourself; that is what life is for." And they were running with people who thought that way. Paul reminds them, quoting a proverb of that day. "Bad company ruins good morals." So he says, "Come to your right mind; begin to face life realistically; stop kidding yourselves. This is a battle, and we have the privilege of living in this time of history and affecting the world of our day. The time is rapidly passing. Make the proper use of it," he says, "for some are even professing to be Christians and have no real knowledge of God at all because they are living just like everyone around them."

So the apostle closes this section with this note: We are not the creatures of time. We are immortal beings. When we gather at the throne of God, the greatest privilege we will claim for ourselves is that we had the opportunity to labor for his namesake here in this life. Make the most of it, Paul says.

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