

Death Destroyed

by Dr. Terry Tramel

PRINTED TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 45, 46, 48-57

1 Corinthians 15:20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

21 For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

23 But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.

24 Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power.

25 For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet.

26 The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

45 So it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

46 Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual.

48 As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly.

49 And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

51 Behold, I show 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

56 The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

***Anchor Text:** "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept." –1 Corinthians 15:20*

Message Objective

To affirm that Christ has conquered death and celebrate our hope of eternal life.

Central Truth

Christ's resurrection guarantees victory over death for believers.

Message Outline

1. Christ's Victory Over Death. 1 Corinthians 15:20-26
2. Sharing in Christ's Victory. 1 Corinthians 15:35-49
3. Triumphant Through Christ's Victory. 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

Study Helps for the Message

Clarifying the Text

1 Corinthians 15:22 – *“As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”* One of Paul's favorite contrasts was between Adam and Jesus (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:44-49). Humanity experienced death because of Adam's original sin. This is a fitting penalty for his action because by it death made its entrance into the world (Genesis 2:17; 3:22-24; Romans 5:12). The Hebrew word *‘adam* is also the Hebrew word for humankind. Genesis 5:2 says that when God created male and female, He *“called their name adam.”* Thus, the historical Adam represented humanity. His sin, therefore, affected all his descendents, in that all are born spiritually dead and will physically die. However, Paul is now announcing that Christ is the head of “another humanity” based on His incarnation. Through His life, death, and resurrection, the effects of the first Adam may be reversed in all who place themselves in Him.¹

1 Corinthians 15:48 – *“As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly.”* The NIV renders this passage, *“As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.”* This text is a part of the continuation of the comparison/contrast between Adam and Jesus. All people receive their soulish nature (Genesis 2:7) from Adam, that is they share his earthly origin, which was the dust of the earth. Likewise, Paul asserts, the righteous receive their spiritual nature from Christ, and in so doing, they share in His heavenly origin (see Ephesians 1:3, 20; 2:6). Paul's use of the adjective *heavenly* likely refers not only to His origin, but also to His present glorified state.

1 Corinthians 15:56 – *“The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.”* In the previous verse the apostle Paul accentuated the victory by citing two Old Testament passages that taunt death (Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14). This latter text mentioned the “sting” of death, which leads Paul to this subsequent statement. He points out that death and its sting are not synonymous. Rather, sin is the sting of death. For the believer whose sin has been forgiven, death has no sting. It is a gain and not a loss (see Philippians 1:21, 23). Paul adds an addendum concerning the correlation between sin and the law. He would later write, *“...By the law is the knowledge of sin”* (Romans 3:20; see also Romans 7:7-11). Yet the apostle knows that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13), therefore sin and death have been vanquished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Historical Background

Corinth was a large, affluent city in ancient Greece. It was strategically located on an isthmus along the coast of the Aegean Sea. By the middle of the first century A.D., Corinth had become one of the key hubs of the sophisticated shipping industry of that day. This city of several hundred thousand people thrived as a metropolis of many merchants. Not only was Corinth

prosperous; it also had a reputation for being one of the most immoral cities in all the empire. Prostitution and sexual vice were rampant; they were often associated with many of the pagan temples and false gods that existed in the city. Throughout the Roman Empire, if a person wanted to insult a woman by implying that she was a harlot, one would call her a “Corinthian girl,” and everyone would know what was meant.

Yet it was in this spiritually darkened city that the light of the gospel began to shine. On the apostle Paul’s second great missionary journey, he left Athens and came to the intellectual city of Corinth. Upon his arrival, he met a husband-and-wife team named Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jewish Christians who had been forced to leave Rome when Claudius the emperor had expelled all the Jews from the capital city (Acts 18:1, 2). Paul joined them in their tent-making craft and began to preach fervently in the synagogue. Although some Jews believed his message, most of the believers at Corinth were Gentiles who had come out of paganism.

Silas and Timothy arrived, and the building blocks were in place to plant a strong church in the city. The apostle stayed 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:11). When he departed the city, a thriving congregation of believers had been left behind. As Paul’s custom was, he frequently stayed in communication with the local assemblies he had established by corresponding with them via letters.

We have knowledge of several such writings between the apostle and the Corinthian church. Paul had written a letter to these believers prior to penning what we know as 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9). The Corinthians in turn had written to Paul requesting his counsel on a number of issues (1 Corinthians 7:1). The letter of 1 Corinthians is the apostle’s response to their inquiry. There would be other correspondence between this church planter and congregation, including what we know as 2 Corinthians.

Literary Background

Of all Paul’s epistles, we know more about the situation at Corinth than we do any other local congregation to which he wrote because the structure of the letter was designed to address specific concerns and answer particular questions. The entire epistle can be divided into two areas. In the first section, Paul responds to reports that he has heard from Chloe’s household (1 Corinthians 1:11 – 6:20). In the last section the apostle replies to “*the things whereof ye wrote unto me*” (1 Corinthians 7:1 – 16:19). Among the issues the congregation had inquired about were (a) celibacy and marriage (ch. 7); (b) eating meat sacrificed to idols (chs. 8-10); (c) conduct related to the Lord’s Supper (ch. 11); (d) spiritual gifts (chs. 12-14); and (e) questions concerning the resurrection (ch. 15).

In this last section, we learn that some people in the Corinthian church had begun to question whether there would be a resurrection of the dead (15:12). This likely took place because of the influence of new converts who had previously embraced the Greek philosophy that the body was sinful. Thus, the goal in life was for the soul to escape the clutches of the flesh. The apostle Paul knew that even though they had not begun to renounce the resurrection of Christ, such a belief would ultimately lead to that conclusion. For if there is no resurrection for us, maybe Jesus Himself did not rise from the dead.

With dramatic flair Paul turns the tables on that argument and *starts* with Jesus’ resurrection as the assurance of their own (15:12). For Paul, if the Lord arose, we will too. Therefore, he restated in this section of the letter the heart of the gospel: Jesus died, was buried, and rose again (15:1-4).

To substantiate this claim, he added the notation, “*After that he was seen...*” (15:5). Nobody saw the resurrection happen, but many people beheld the risen Christ. Paul’s witness list is impressive, including the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to Peter, the 12 disciples, more than 500 believers at one time, James, and all the apostles (15:5-7). Paul then included himself as having witnessed the risen Lord, obviously alluding to his conversion on the Damascus Road (15:8).

Plan Ahead

☐ **READING:** Read all the resurrection accounts from the four Gospels (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20). Be prepared to intersperse Paul’s theological assertions in 1 Corinthians 15 among the details from these narratives.

☐ **PRAYER:** Visitors who attend religious services only once or twice a year on special days may be present in your service. Spend extra time in prayer this week asking the Lord to use this message to reach their hearts with the good news of the risen Christ.

Introducing the Message

☐ **QUOTATION:** The late American astronomer, Carl Sagan (1934-1996) made the following statement before his death: “I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue. But as much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking.”²

His wife, Ann Druyan, described the moment of his death: “Contrary to the fantasies of the fundamentalists, there was no deathbed conversion, no last-minute refuge taken in a comforting vision of a heaven or an afterlife... As we looked deeply into each other’s eyes, it was with a shared conviction that our wondrous life together was ending forever.”³

Contrast these hopeless assertions with the triumphant hope of the child of God.

☐ **QUESTION:** The most provoking question of the ages was posed in Job 14:14, “*If a man die, shall he live again?*” As noted above, the atheist says he will not. The agnostic says he may or may not. The scientist says we cannot know. The philosopher says we hope so. But the Bible emphatically says, “Yes, we all will live again!”

The Power of the Word

1. Christ’s Victory Over Death (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

COMMENTARY

a. Resurrection Commenced – 1 Corinthians 15:20. “*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.*” This verse is Paul’s resounding conclusion to the argument he has been making from the beginning of this chapter. His earlier determination was that Christ’s resurrection assures believers of their own life after death (v. 12). His logic contended that if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Jesus Himself did not rise (v. 13). To those who would question the importance of this issue, Paul added that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, his preaching and their faith was in vain (v. 14). Such a result would make the apostle a false minister, because this was the message he championed repeatedly (v. 15).

Even more dramatically, Paul tells the Corinthians that if Christ did not rise, they are still in their sins (v. 17). Likewise, those who died placing their faith in Jesus are also lost (v. 18). No wonder the apostle's argument was irrefutable. His clinching statement declared, *"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable"* (v. 19).

If Paul's writing had ended there, the tone of this entire section would have been depressing indeed. However, he continued, *"But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept."* *But now!* What a difference two words make. For Paul, this event is an established fact, a matter of historical record, a done deal. After arguing from the negative standpoint (vv. 12-19), he moves to the positive assertions of the resurrection claim. Paul identifies Jesus as *"the firstfruits,"* an Old Testament word (Exodus 23:16, 19) that is used here in the sense of a preliminary installment of what will be both an example and a guarantee of more to come (see Romans 8:23).⁴ The phrase *"them that slept"* is, of course, a familiar biblical metaphor for those who have died. Again, Paul's premise is that Jesus' resurrection assures believers that they, too, will live again.

b. Resurrection Continued – 1 Corinthians 15:21-23. *"Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming"* (v. 23). In verses 21 and 22, Paul explains how the Lord's resurrection affirms the future rising of the saints. He shows how one man's sin (Adam's) brought death to the entire human race. Likewise, through another man (Jesus Christ), resurrection life is now offered to humanity.⁵

Verse 23 moves into vivid language from Paul as he describes the future resurrection of believers. The phrase *"own order"* is a military term denoting the various ranks and companies in an army. This idea is harmonious with the different groups that are caught up or resurrected in the book of Revelation; however, in this context, Paul notes only two resurrection companies: Christ and then His church. The first phase of the resurrection happened on the third day after Jesus' death; the next phase will be at the second coming of Christ. This second usage of *"firstfruits"* echoes the idea of *"more to come."*

c. Resurrection Consummated – 1 Corinthians 15:24-26. *"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power"* (v. 24). Paul then takes his readers beyond even the resurrection of the saints to *"the end,"* a future time of great triumph when Jesus will present the Kingdom to His Father (see Matthew 13:41-43). The writer's point in interjecting this emphasis is to show that at the consummation of all things, everything will be vanquished and conquered. When time is swallowed up by eternity, all the enemies of God's master plan will be at His feet (v. 25). Included among them, finally, will be death. The final funeral of the ages will be when death dies. This Pauline personification of death vividly harmonizes with the revelator's description of the destruction of death (Revelation 20:11-15). When Christ makes all things new, there will be *"no more death"* (Revelation 21:4).

PREACHING HINTS AND APPLICATION

☐ **OBSERVATION:** Easter isn't over – it has only just begun. It is not just a one-time event – it is a glorious process that has spanned 2,000 years.

☐ **EMPHASIS:** Repeat throughout the message the first two words from the Printed Text: *"BUT NOW!"* Emphasize the difference in the condition and fate of people before and after Easter.

2. Sharing in Christ's Victory (1 Corinthians 15:35-49)

COMMENTARY

a. The Contrast – 1 Corinthians 15:35-45 (only v. 45 in **Printed Text**). *“So it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit”* (v. 45). In the middle of this chapter, Paul shifts the emphasis from the fact of the future resurrection to the nature of the glorified body. In verse 35, he begins to answer potentially problematic questions related to this doctrine. Like a skilled teacher, Paul anticipates the inquiries before they are raised: *“But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?”*

Evidently, the Corinthians were concerned about these issues. Since a “resurrection body” would be like the mortal bodies we have now, how can the resurrection of such a body occur? Paul calls such questions foolish (v. 36). He proceeds to set forth a series of analogies related to seeds, animals, and planets (vv. 37-41). His point of comparison is that God can take similar physical material and organize it differently to accomplish his purposes.⁶

The writer proceeds to explain that the resurrected body is the same body yet at the same time completely new (vv. 42-44). He offers four contrasts between the body before death and the body after death. From corruption to incorruption, dishonor to glory, weakness to power, natural to spiritual, so will be the believer's resurrection!

Paul then returns to his comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ. He refers to the creation of Adam's body (Genesis 2:7) and the resurrection of Christ's glorified body (see Luke 24:36-43). The NIV translates *“quickenning spirit”* as *“life-giving spirit.”* Jesus is not only the second Adam; He is also distinguished as the last Adam. This indicates that He is the final head of the human race. Christ is not one in a long line of prophets; He is the finality of the Father, the final representative of the race.

b. The Constant – 1 Corinthians 15:46-48 (only vv. 46 and 48 in **Printed Text**). *“As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly”* (v. 48). In verse 46, Paul points out the obvious: Adam came first, then Christ. So it is with Christians: they possess a natural body first; then they will have a resurrected body after death. Adam came from the ground and dwelt on the earth; glorified bodies are possible for believers because Jesus is the *“Lord from heaven”* (v. 47).

Verse 48 echoes Paul's previous assertions: as descendants of Adam, we possessed a body with a fallen nature like his. Likewise, those who enter into spiritual union with Christ will one day receive a body completely free from sin like His glorified body (Philippians 3:20, 21; 1 John 3:1-3).

c. The Conclusion – 1 Conclusion 15:49. *“And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”* Although this language has allusions to the eternal state, Paul seems to be exhorting the Corinthians to begin to prepare for their future condition in the present. The NIV renders this passage, *“And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.”* Thus, to be like Jesus is the supreme quest for an individual. Conforming to the image of Christ was one of Paul's favorite themes (for

example, see Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). It cannot be fully obtained until the second coming of Jesus.

TEACHING HINTS AND APPLICATION

☐ **EXPLANATION:** Read 1 John 3:2: *“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”* The resurrection body of believers is a mystery that cannot be fully fathomed in this life. Yet one thing about our glorified bodies is clear: *“we shall be like him.”* Jesus Christ had a glorified body that could be in one place at one moment and another place the next. He could go in and out of rooms without using a door. He could leave the Mount of Olives and not be bound by the laws of gravity. *“We shall be like Him!”*

☐ **POWER POINT:** Use this comparison / contrast between Adam and Christ (optional).

ADAM	CHRIST
Natural body	Spiritual body
Came first	Followed
First man	Last Adam
Became a living soul	Became a quickening spirit
Origin in the dust	Origin in heaven
Of the earth	Heavenly
Those of the dust are like him.	Heavenly ones are like Him.
We have borne the likeness of Adam.	We will bear the likeness of Christ.

☐ **OBSERVATION:** To gain a greater understanding of what it means to have borne the likeness of Adam, rehearse with your audience Adam’s behavior after his initial sin. It became the pattern for all of his descendants. For example, he tried to cover his nakedness, a consequence of sin (Genesis 3:7). He then tried to hide from God (Genesis 3:8). He then tried to make excuses for his sin (Genesis 3:12). All humanity has imitated the first Adam in trying to cover up their wrongdoing, hiding from the Lord, and making excuses for their actions.

3. Triumphant Through Christ’s Victory (1 Corinthians 15:50-57)

COMMENTARY

a. Exception – 1 Corinthians 15:50-52. *“Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”* (v. 51). Throughout this chapter, Paul has been answering the question of what will happen to believers who have died at the coming of the Lord. He closes out this resurrection discourse by turning his attention to what will happen to Christians who are alive at that moment. In light of all the apostle has explained, it is obvious that people cannot enter into the eternal state in the flesh and blood bodies they have had on earth (v. 50). However, Paul quickly assures his readers that the Lord has a glorious plan to enable His saints who are living at the time of His return to enter immediately into heaven. This truth is so revolutionary Paul calls it a *mystery*. This word is used in Scripture to denote a truth previously not known in the Old Testament but now revealed. Jesus Himself had partially introduced the

idea of the rapture event (John 14:1-3), yet it was through the pen of Paul that the complete light of this future action was made known (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

Here, once again, he uses the familiar biblical metaphor of *sleep* to describe death (see Acts 7:60; 1 Thessalonians 4:14). The living believers will not die; they will “*be changed*.” This expression indicates these saints will be translated, taken out of one sphere and placed in another. This supernatural event will occur so suddenly, Paul describes it as happening “*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*” (v. 52). He added that it will transpire at “*the last trump*.” In the Old Testament, the trumpet often signaled the appearance of God (Exodus 19:16). Paul calls this rapture blast the “*last trump*” because the church will never again be separated from the presence of God.⁷

b. Elation – 1 Corinthians 15:53-55. “*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*” (v. 55) Paul explains that this rapture event will allow the living saints, like those who had died, to exchange the temporal, imperfect, corruptible bodies for the permanent, complete, incorruptible ones the Lord has prepared for His own (vv. 53, 54). At this moment, Paul asserts that Isaiah’s prophecy that death will be swallowed up in victory is being fulfilled (see Isaiah 25:8).

In verse 55, Paul follows that citation with another allusion to an Old Testament text (Hosea 13:14). In this passage, the prophet Hosea foresaw the future destruction of death. The apostle uses this ancient text to declare that the triumphant church will one day taunt death and the grave by bursting into rapturous song.

c. Exclamation – 1 Corinthians 15:57, 58 (v. 58 not in **Printed Text**). “*But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 57). Both in Eden and at Calvary, death appeared to have triumphed over humanity. Yet Paul has thoroughly presented the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Victory has been achieved through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. No wonder the only appropriate response is thanksgiving to God. In light of this most wondrous of all truths, the apostle ended this section of the letter by admonishing the Corinthians to be “*stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...*” (v. 58). For those who would heed his counsel, their service to the Savior would not be in vain.

TEACHING HINTS AND APPLICATION

☐ **CLARIFICATION:** The phrase “*last trump*” in 15:52 has often brought confusion when some try to associate it with the seven trumpets in Revelation chapters 8 through 11. This error has caused some to presume that the rapture of the church will not happen until the middle or end of the Tribulation. There is no correlation between Paul’s mention here and John’s use in the Apocalypse. The trumpets in Revelation all bring judgment during the Tribulation period. Paul’s emphasis in the Corinthian letter is related to the church.

Closing the Message

☐ **FINAL FUNERAL:** Announce to the class the final funeral of the ages. The deceased will be Death; Death itself shall die! Death will be swallowed up in victory (Revelation 21:4). At the final funeral we will ever attend, nobody will be weeping or mourning; instead, the saints will be shouting and worshiping, saying, “*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*”

□ **SONG COMPARISON:** Many years ago Alfred Ackley composed what some believe is the classic Easter Hymn. Ackley titled his song “He Lives.” He wrote:

He lives, He lives; Christ Jesus lives today;
 He walks with me and talks with me
 Along life’s narrow way.
 He lives, He lives, salvation to impart;
 You ask me how I know he lives;
 He lives within my heart.

In the last couple of decades, a generation has arisen which questions everything. Their view of the Easter message is, “He lives; so what? What does the resurrection mean to me?” Several years after Ackley’s hymn, Bill Gaither wrote a song, adding one word to Ackley’s title. His song answers the skeptic’s questions:

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow;
 Because He lives, all fear is gone;
 Because I know He holds the future,
 Life is worth the living just because He lives.

ENDNOTES

1. French Arrington and Roger Stronstad, eds., *Life in the Spirit New Testament Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999, p. 903.
2. www.positiveatheism.org.
3. www.positiveatheism.org.
4. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, Colorado Springs, Colorado: Chariot Victor, 1983, p. 543.
5. See Romans 5:12-21 for an extended analogy between the two Adams and their effect on mankind.
6. Kenneth Barker and John Kohlenberger III, eds., *NIV Bible Commentary: The New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, p. 653.
7. Walvoord and Zuck, p. 546.