

Context of 1 Corinthians 15

Review: 1 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul around 53–55 CE to the church in Corinth, a diverse and cosmopolitan city. The church faced issues like division, moral challenges, and theological misunderstandings. In chapter 15, Paul addresses a specific issue: some Corinthians denied the resurrection of the dead (v. 12). This denial likely stemmed from Greco-Roman philosophical influences (e.g., Stoicism or Epicureanism), which often rejected bodily resurrection, favoring a disembodied afterlife or no afterlife at all. Paul argues for the centrality of Christ's resurrection and its implications for believers.

Structure of 1 Corinthians 15

- Verses 1–11: The gospel foundation, emphasizing Christ's resurrection.
- Verses 12–34: The necessity of the general resurrection.
- Verses 35–50: The nature of the resurrection body.
- Verses 51–58: The mystery and triumph of the resurrection.

Exegesis – 1 Corinthians 15:12-22, verse by verse

Note: English text is taken from the Lexham English Bible; the Greek text is from the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)

Verse 12:

Now if Christ is preached as raised up from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς κηρύσσεται ὅτι **ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγήγερται**, **πῶς λέγουσιν** ἐν ὑμῖν τινες ὅτι ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν;

- English: Paul begins with a conditional statement, noting that the proclamation of Christ's resurrection is central to the gospel, yet some Corinthians deny a general resurrection.
- Greek: The phrase ***Εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς κηρύσσεται*** ("if Christ is proclaimed") uses the present passive ***κηρύσσεται***, emphasizing ongoing proclamation. ***ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγήγερται*** ("raised from the dead") employs the perfect tense, indicating a completed action with ongoing effects. The question ***πῶς**

λέγουσιν* (“how can some say”) highlights Paul’s incredulity at the inconsistency.

- Theological Point: The resurrection of Christ is the foundation of Christian hope. Denying bodily resurrection undermines the gospel.

Verses 13-16

¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁴ But if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ And also we are found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if after all, then, the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised either.

¹³ εἰ δὲ ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν, οὐδὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται· ¹⁴ εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς οὐκ ἐγήγερται, **κενὸν** ἄρα τὸ κήρυγμα ἡμῶν, κενὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν, ¹⁵ εὐρισκόμεθα δὲ καὶ **ψευδομάρτυρες τοῦ Θεοῦ**, ὅτι ἐμαρτυρήσαμεν κατὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὅτι ἤγειρεν τὸν Χριστόν, ὃν οὐκ ἤγειρεν εἴπερ ἄρα νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται. ¹⁶ εἰ γὰρ νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, οὐδὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται·

- English: Paul uses a logical chain: if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not raised, rendering preaching and faith “in vain” (**κενός**, empty).
- Greek: The repetition of *εἰ* (if) clauses creates a rhetorical progression. *κενὸν* and *ματαία* (v. 17, “futile”) emphasize futility. The phrase *ψευδομάρτυρες τοῦ Θεοῦ* (“false witnesses about God”) underscores the severity of denying resurrection, as it accuses God of falsehood.
- Theological Point: Christ’s resurrection is inseparable from the general resurrection. Without it, the apostolic witness is fraudulent.

Verses 17-19

¹⁷ But if Christ has not been raised, your faith is empty; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ And as a further result, those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If [we have put our hope] in Christ in this life only, we are of all people most pitiable.

¹⁷ εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς οὐκ ἐγήγερται, **ματαία** ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν, ἔτι ἐστὲ **ἐν ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις** ὑμῶν. ¹⁸ ἄρα καὶ οἱ κοιμηθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ ἀπώλοντο. ¹⁹ εἰ ἐν τῇ ζωῇ ταύτῃ ἐν Χριστῷ ἡλπιότες ἐσμέν μόνον, **ἐλβεινότεροι** πάντων ἀνθρώπων ἐσμέν.

- English: If Christ is not raised, faith is futile, sins remain unforgiven, and believers who have died are lost. Christians would be “most to be pitied” if their hope is only temporal.

- Greek: **ματαία** (futile) contrasts with **κενός** (empty), suggesting a faith that is not only empty but ineffectual. **ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις** (“in your sins”) implies ongoing guilt. **ἐλκενότεροι** (“most pitiable”) is a superlative, emphasizing the tragic outcome of a resurrection-less faith.
- Theological Point: Resurrection ensures forgiveness and eternal life. Without it, Christian hope is reduced to this life, making it pitiful.

Verses 20-22

²⁰ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since through a man came death, also through a man came the resurrection of the dead. ²² For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

²⁰ **Νυνὶ δὲ** Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν, **ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων**. ²¹ ἐπειδὴ γὰρ δι’ ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι’ ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν. ²² ὥστε γὰρ **ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ** πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ **ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ** πάντες **ζωοποιηθήσονται**.

- English: Paul pivots with **Νυνὶ δὲ** (“But now”), affirming Christ’s resurrection as **ἀπαρχή** (“firstfruits”), guaranteeing the future resurrection of believers. He contrasts Adam’s role in bringing death with Christ’s role in bringing life.
- Greek: **ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων** (“firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”) uses agricultural imagery, where the firstfruits guarantee the harvest. **ζωοποιηθήσονται** (“shall be made alive”) is a divine passive, indicating God’s action. The parallel **ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ** and **ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ** highlights corporate solidarity.
- Theological Point: Christ’s resurrection initiates the eschatological resurrection, reversing Adam’s curse. The “all” in Christ refers to believers, not universalism, given the context of “in Christ.”

Key Themes

- Resurrection’s Centrality: Christ’s resurrection is the linchpin of Christian faith, validating preaching, faith, and forgiveness.
- Corporate Solidarity: Adam and Christ represent humanity in death and life, respectively.
- Eschatological Hope: Christ’s resurrection guarantees believers’ future resurrection.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Verse 51

Behold, I tell you a mystery: we will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed,

ἰδοὺ **μυστήριον** ὑμῖν λέγω· **πάντες οὐ κοιμηθησόμεθα** **πάντες δὲ ἀλλαγησόμεθα**,

- English: Paul introduces a “mystery” (**μυστήριον**), a divine truth previously hidden. Not all will die, but all will be transformed.
- Greek: ***ἰδοὺ*** (“Behold”) grabs attention. ***μυστήριον*** refers to eschatological revelation. ***πάντες οὐ κοιμηθησόμεθα*** (“we shall not all sleep”) implies some will be alive at Christ’s return, while ***πάντες δὲ ἀλλαγησόμεθα*** (“we shall all be changed”) emphasizes universal transformation; passive future indicative 1st person plural indicates God’s action on those in Christ.
- Theological Point: The mystery reveals that both the living and the dead will experience bodily transformation at the eschaton.

Verse 52

in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

ἐν ἀτόμῳ, ἐν ῥιπῇ ὀφθαλμοῦ, ἐν τῇ **ἐσχάτῃ σάλπιγγι**· σαλπίζει γάρ, καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐγερθήσονται **ἄφθαρτοι**, καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀλλαγησόμεθα.

- English: The transformation occurs instantly at the “last trumpet,” a symbol of the eschatological event.
- Greek: ***ἐν ἀτόμῳ, ἐν ῥιπῇ ὀφθαλμοῦ*** (“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”) emphasizes speed and indivisibility (***ἄτομος***, “uncut”). ***ἐσχάτῃ σάλπιγγι*** (“last trumpet”) evokes apocalyptic imagery (cf. Matthew 24:31; 1 Thess 4:16). ***ἄφθαρτοι*** (“imperishable”) describes the resurrection body’s quality.
- Theological Point: The suddenness and divine initiative of the resurrection underscore God’s sovereignty.

Verses 53-54

⁵³ For it is necessary for this perishable body to put on incorruptibility, and this mortal body to put on immortality. ⁵⁴ But whenever this perishable body puts on incorruptibility and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: “Death is swallowed up in victory.

⁵³ δεῖ γὰρ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο **ἐνδύσασθαι** ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο **ἐνδύσασθαι** ἀθανασίαν. ⁵⁴ ὅταν δὲ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο **ἐνδύσῃται** ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο **ἐνδύσῃται** ἀθανασίαν, τότε γενήσεται ὁ λόγος ὁ γεγραμμένος **Κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος**.

- English: The perishable and mortal must become imperishable and immortal, fulfilling the prophecy of death's defeat (Isa 25:8).
- Greek: ***ἐνδύσασθαι*** ("put on") suggests clothing oneself with new qualities. ***Κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος*** ("Death is swallowed up in victory") quotes Isaiah 25:8 (LXX), emphasizing total triumph.
- Theological Point: The resurrection body is qualitatively different, free from decay and death.

Verses 55-57

⁵⁵ Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ⁵⁶ Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

⁵⁵ ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ νίκος; **ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον;** ⁵⁶ τὸ δὲ κέντρον τοῦ θανάτου ἡ ἁμαρτία, ἡ δὲ δύναμις **τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ νόμος**. ⁵⁷ τῷ δὲ θεῷ **χάρις** τῷ διδόντι ἡμῖν τὸ νίκος διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

- English: Paul taunts death, quoting Hosea 13:14, and explains that sin, empowered by the law, is death's sting. Victory comes through Christ.
- Greek: ***ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον;*** ("where, O death, is your sting?") is a rhetorical challenge. ***ἡ ἁμαρτία*** and ***ὁ νόμος*** link sin's power to the law's inability to save. ***χάρις*** ("thanks") reflects gratitude for God's gift of victory.
- Theological Point: Christ's resurrection nullifies sin's power, which the law amplified, granting believers victory.

Verse 58

So then, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Ὡστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί, **ἐδραῖοι** γίνεσθε, **ἀμετακίνητοι**, περισσεύοντες ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ τοῦ κυρίου πάντοτε, εἰδότες ὅτι ὁ **κόπος ὑμῶν οὐκ ἔστιν κενὸς** ἐν κυρίῳ.

- English: Paul exhorts steadfastness and diligence, assuring that labor "in the Lord" is not in vain.

- Greek: *ἑδραῖοι* (“steadfast”) and *ἄμετακίνητοι* (“immovable”) emphasize stability. *κόπος οὐκ ἔστιν κενός* (“labor is not in vain”) echoes *κενός* from vv. 14, 17, tying the passage together.
- Theological Point: The resurrection assures that Christian service has eternal significance.

Key themes

- Transformation: All believers, living or dead, will receive imperishable bodies.
- Victory over Death: Christ’s resurrection defeats sin and death, fulfilling Scripture.
- Ethical Exhortation: Resurrection hope motivates steadfast service.

Theological synthesis

- Resurrection as Foundational: In 15:12–22, Paul establishes that denying the resurrection undermines the gospel. Christ’s resurrection guarantees believers’ resurrection, reversing Adam’s curse.
- Eschatological Transformation: In 15:51–58, Paul reveals the “mystery” of bodily transformation, ensuring continuity (same body) and change (imperishable). This fulfills God’s victory over death.
- Ethical Implications: The resurrection provides hope, motivating believers to persevere in faith and service, knowing their efforts are eternally significant.

Back to Cultural and Historical Context

- Greco-Roman Context: The Corinthians’ denial of resurrection reflects Greco-Roman skepticism about bodily resurrection, favoring spiritual immortality. Paul counters with Jewish-Christian eschatology, emphasizing bodily resurrection.
- Jewish Context: Paul draws on Jewish apocalyptic traditions (e.g., Isa 25:8, Hos 13:14) to affirm God’s triumph over death.
- Church Context: The Corinthians’ divisions and ethical lapses (chs. 1–14) make Paul’s call to steadfastness urgent.

More linguistic notes

- Repetition: Terms like *κενός* (empty, futile) and *ἀνάστασις* (resurrection) unify the argument.

- Tenses: Perfect tenses (*ἐγήγερται*) emphasize the ongoing reality of Christ's resurrection, while future tenses (*ἀλλαγησόμεθα*, *ζωοποιηθήσονται*) point to eschatological hope.
- Imagery: Agricultural *ἀπαρχή*, firstfruits), military (**νίκος**, victory), and clothing (**ἐνδύσασθαι**, put on) metaphors enrich the text.

Application

- Doctrinal: The resurrection is non-negotiable for Christian faith, ensuring forgiveness, hope, and eternal life.
- Ethical: Believers are called to steadfast service, trusting that their labor has eternal value.
- Eschatological: The promise of transformation encourages perseverance amid suffering and doubt.

Discussion questions

1. Why is the reality of the resurrection essential to the Christian faith?
2. How does it provide hope in suffering?
3. What does “victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” mean for us?

Appendix

Matthew 24:31

And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect together from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other end of it.

καὶ ἀποστελεῖ τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ μετὰ σάλπιγγος μεγάλης, καὶ ἐπισυνάξουσιν τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων ἀπ’ ἄκρων οὐρανῶν ἕως τῶν ἄκρων αὐτῶν.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον,

Isaiah 25:8

He will destroy death forever, and the Lord Yahweh will wipe off the tears from all faces, and he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth, for Yahweh has spoken.

Isaiah 25:8 (LXX)

Death has prevailed and swallowed up; but again the Lord God has taken away every tear from every face. He has taken away the reproach of people from all the earth: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it

κατέπιεν ὁ θάνατος ἰσχύσας, καὶ πάλιν ἀφεῖλε Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς πᾶν δάκρυον ἀπὸ παντὸς προσώπου· τὸ ὄνειδος τοῦ λαοῦ ἀφεῖλεν ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς γῆς, τὸ γὰρ στόμα Κυρίου ἐλάλησε.

Hosea 13:14

Should I redeem them from the power of Sheol? Should I deliver them from death? Where are your plagues, O Death? Where is your destruction, O Sheol? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.