

# WHEN JESUS APPEARS THERE WILL BE NO MORE DEATH

## 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 25-58

### INTRODUCTION

This is the first sermon in a five part series that will take us to the end of the year in which we will consider together five things that will happen when Jesus Christ returns to this earth personally and visibly. The reason we are considering what will happen at the return of Christ during this Christmas season is because, historically, this has been the purpose of the Advent season for the church. Advent simply means “arrival” or “coming”. Thus during the Advent season we do two things. First, we remember the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus when he was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. Second, we also anticipate that he is coming again. There will be another Advent, another appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ at the end of all things. So during this Advent season we are going to think about what will happen when he arrives the second time.

Why should you care about what will happen when Jesus comes again? There are a lot of reasons you should care but I’m only going to give you two of them. First, you are going to have to deal with Jesus when he comes. Every human being who has ever lived will one day answer to this Jesus. He is the one God has appointed as judge of all and he has given proof of this by raising him from the dead, as Paul told the Athenian people in Acts 17. When a student enrolls in college she would be very foolish to care nothing about what she must do to successfully graduate and what benefits she will receive upon graduation. So too you are living like a fool if you are living indifferently to the return of Christ.

Second, if you are a Christian, you should care about what will happen at the return of Jesus because the more you know about what happens when Christ returns the more you will be able to live with joy in the midst of this disappointing life. The return of Jesus is our “blessed hope” and thus it is the anticipation of Christ’s coming that fills us with joy and enables us to persevere in every difficulty. Your joy in the present moment is directly related to how eager is your longing for the return of Jesus. We all know how this works because we regularly experience this joyful anticipation in regards to future events. Our family spends two weeks in Door County on vacation each summer. Throughout the course of the year all I have to do is think about being there with my wife and children and daughters-in-law and grandchildren in Door County and I feel happy. Especially as the day of our departure draws near I find great help in the anticipation of going. My work becomes easier; I am able to put up with difficulties because I know that in a couple of weeks or a few days I will be in Door County with my family. So my aim during these five weeks is to hold before our eyes the glorious things that will be true for us when Jesus returns so that you and I will be filled with joy now in the anticipation of his return.

The first benefit I want us to consider together is this: when Jesus comes death will be no more. We are going to rejoice in the death of death as it is described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Certain people in the church in Corinth were teaching that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. They were teaching this because it is what Greek culture and religion said. They wanted to believe in Jesus but they refused to believe in a physically resurrected Jesus. They taught that there was no salvation for the body but only for the soul. Thus the body of Jesus was not raised but only his soul was given life again. So Paul argues in the opening portion of this chapter that if Jesus was not raised from the dead then the gospel he preached and they believed is not true. Then, beginning in v. 20 he asserts what is true because God raised Jesus from the dead. What he emphasizes is what will happen when Jesus appears again as a physically resurrected Savior. You can see in v. 23 that all the benefits gained for us by the resurrection of Christ will be fully realized when he comes and not before. The main benefit that Paul reflects on in this passage is that our resurrection at the coming of Jesus is the death of death.

### MAIN POINT

**Death was defeated when God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore...**

## **I. The resurrection of all believers is inevitable (vv. 20-27a)**

Paul begins by asserting the historical fact upon which the whole Christian faith is based: “Christ has been raised from the dead.” The tense of the verb is important. Jesus, who is the Christ, at a point in time in the past “fell asleep”, that is, he died. However, at a point in the past this dead Jesus was raised from the dead. Thus he continues now as a physically resurrected person. His corpse was given life and the same person whose corpse was in the grave, came out of the grave. This is a fact. The same Jesus who died upon that cross and who was buried in that tomb was given life by God and he continues to exist in that resurrected state yet today. That is the force of the perfect passive verb, “has been raised.”

Now Paul says that this resurrected Christ is the “firstfruits of all who have fallen asleep.” By using this word, “firstfruits” Paul is referring to the practice within both Jewish and pagan agrarian cultures of taking the first grain that was harvested and offering it to Yahweh or the pagan gods. The point is that the firstfruits are the sign the harvest has begun and the guarantee of the full harvest. It would make no sense to offer the firstfruits of the wheat but then leave all the ripe wheat in the field to rot. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s “firstfruits, his pledge that he is going to raise from the dead all those who die in Christ. He is not referring to all human beings when he says “those who have fallen asleep” but to all those who fall asleep in Christ. (You can see that by looking up two verses to v. 18 or in v. 23, where Paul says that those who will be made alive are those who belong to Christ.)

Paul now shows why it is inevitable that all who are in Christ will be raised from the dead. What Paul is doing here is making reference to Genesis 1-3. God made an agreement with Adam. He told him that if he would obey him by not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that he and all of his descendants would live but that if he ate from that tree, he and all of his descendants would die. We all know what Adam did. He ate of the tree in disobedience to God and thus death entered the world of human beings because that is what God said would happen. Therefore, from the day of his disobedience every human being, that is, every descendant of Adam and Eve dies.

Now the promise of life is based upon perfect obedience to God’s command. No human since Adam has been able to obey God perfectly because no human has wanted to obey God perfectly as we all are born with a sin nature which we have inherited from Adam. We all want to sin. Therefore, God sent his Son into the world, born of a virgin and thus fully human but without a sin nature. This fully human Jesus did what Adam did not do. He fully obeyed God as a man. Thus God rewarded Jesus with life because that is what he deserved. God’s raising him from the dead is proof positive that he fully obeyed God. Thus, just as all who are in Adam die because he disobeyed God so also all who are in Christ are made alive because he obeyed God. This is the ultimate point that Paul makes. It is absolutely certain that every human being will die because every human being is a descendant of Adam. In exactly the same way every human being that belongs to Jesus will live because he lives. If you are a Christian it is just as certain that you will be raised from the dead by Jesus as that you are going to die a physical death.

Now in v. 23 Paul tells us when the full resurrection harvest will occur. It will occur when Jesus returns personally and visibly to this earth. It is at that coming of Christ when he raises all who belong to him from the dead that this age will end and the new age of God’s kingdom will begin. It is at that time that this resurrected Jesus will destroy every enemy that opposes God and the last of his enemies to be destroyed is death itself. He will put death to death by giving resurrection life to all those who belong to him. We can be absolutely certain that this is what is going to happen because God raised Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Christ was the beginning of a chain reaction that will end, not in a nuclear explosion, but in the establishment of God’s kingdom in which there will be no death because everyone who is part of that kingdom will have been raised from the dead, given the resurrection life of Jesus himself. It is inevitable that death will be no more for all who are in Christ. Everyone in here is going to die because you are a descendant of Adam. If you want to live forever, to be raised from the dead, you must trust in Christ now. Do not wait, turn from your sins and depend

upon Jesus as the one who obeyed God for you and who died the death you deserve and who will give you life at the end of all things.

*Death was defeated when God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore...*

- *The resurrection of all believers is inevitable*
- *And therefore...*

## **II. The future will be like the present only different (vv. 35-53)**

The rest of this chapter is Paul's answer to the cynical, skeptical questions of some in Corinth which he records for us in v. 35. As I said earlier, some people in the church in Corinth were trying to blend Christianity and Greek ways of thinking. They rejected any thought of physical resurrection because they viewed the unseen, spiritual world as the only true and real world. They viewed this present physical world as a corrupt, unholy reality. Thus they believed your immaterial soul would live forever but the body would die and rot in the grave. Thus they rejected the possibility of resurrection. You can almost hear their sneers in the questions of v. 35. "Come on Paul, how exactly are the dead raised? What kind of physical body can possibly be fit for that perfect spiritual world where God lives? You actually expect this physical container I live in with all of its gross functions to continue to exist in God's presence forever?!"

Paul begins his answer with a very strong denunciation. Literally he says, "Fool!" He is using OT language here. He is saying that those who reject a physical resurrection are just like the fool who says in his heart that there is no God (Psalm 14:1). Those who reject physical resurrection leave God out of the picture. Then Paul begins a very careful and very logical description of the kind of body that God gives to those who fall asleep in Christ. He begins by using the familiar, physical world as an analogy. First, he reminds us that the life of a plant is expressed in two very different forms. First there is the "naked seed" which must be planted in the ground and "die" but the life of that seed then comes out of the ground in a very different form. While the wheat plant looks very different from the seed that was planted, yet it is still the same plant. Each variety of seed produces its own kind of plant, just as God has personally determined. Then (v.39) Paul shows that God has made a wide variety of "bodies" to live in his creation. The form in which each thing exists is determined by God and fits the conditions and purposes for which it exists. Human flesh is different from land animals, which is different from birds, which is different from fish. Each kind of "body" fits the environment in which it lives. I can't fly or build a nest in a tree. I can't live in the ocean. I don't live in the plains of Africa eating grass. I cannot do these things because I don't have a body which is adapted to these environments. So also, in vv. 40-41, there is a difference between the bodies of creatures and the "bodies" of sun, moon and stars. The sun wouldn't fit in the ocean and a whale wouldn't fit as the object around which all the planets revolve. Each form of existence varies according to God's determination and fits perfectly in the environment in which it is situated. Every form of existence has its own particular "glory" as each is made by God for its particular place and purpose.

In vv. 42-44 Paul applies the analogies he has just made to the resurrection. The fact that a seed "dies" and then comes to life in a totally different form by God's power shows that it is not at all irrational for a human being to die physically and be "planted" in the ground and decay and then return to life in a different physical form. And just as each form of existence corresponds to its environment and God's purpose so also it makes perfect sense that human beings would exist in one form in this age but that we would exist in a different form in the age to come. In vv. 42-44 Paul describes our current condition with four words and he describes our future condition with four other words. The body we currently have is perishable, dishonorable, weak and natural. The body we will receive at the resurrection is imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. Each body fits with the environment it inhabits and fits the purposes God has for it.

Consider what each of these words mean about our current bodies. Perishable: what this means is that our current body is in a state of decay. We came from dust and we are going to return to dust. This physical body that is now me will one day rot, like a piece of fruit left out of the fridge on a hot summer day. This body fits

with the decaying universe in which we live. Dishonor: Our current body is a lowly, humble thing. While it is a good gift from God and has a certain glory as v. 40 says, yet human bodies are not glorious like mountains or stars or the sun or flowers. C.S. Lewis makes the point that if we were to see a Christian living with his or her resurrected body right now we would be tempted to fall down and worship due to his or her glorious appearance. But we are not now so tempted because these bodies are humble, lowly bodies. Weakness: This present body is subject to disease and accident. It is a fragile thing, this body of ours. It is easily bruised and harmed and destroyed. It requires great effort to keep our bodies healthy and fit. Finally, it is a natural body. It is perfectly appropriate for this natural, cursed world.

But our resurrected bodies will be imperishable. That is they will never die, never wear out. They will never turn to dust but will always exist. Those bodies will be glorious bodies. They will be beautiful and without flaw. They will fit in with the glory of the new heavens and the new earth. Our new bodies will be powerful. They will not be subject to disease or accident. They cannot be harmed anymore. They will be entirely appropriate for fulfilling our mandate to rule over God's new creation. Finally, our new bodies will be spiritual rather than natural. They will be materially different from these bodies, yet they will still be us and they will still be material, made out of atoms and composed of molecules with all the organ systems but fit for a spiritual universe. They will be fit to live in a physical universe where God openly manifests his presence, where Jesus lives among us, where the HS animates all things.

Paul, after describing our current bodies as natural and our resurrection bodies as spiritual returns again to the analogy of Adam and Christ (vv.45-49). Without going into all the details the basic point that Paul makes is this: the creation of Adam into whose nostrils God breathed life, shows that God intended for man to live with him forever and rule over his creation. However, Adam, by virtue of his disobedience became a "man of dust", that is a man who was destined to die. He and all those who bear his image were and are unfit to live with God in the new creation. Therefore, the second Adam, our Lord Jesus Christ not only gained life for himself but by his obedience obtained the power to make alive all those who trust in him. Therefore, as v. 49 asserts, we can be certain that just as we have shared in the dust life of Adam we will also share in the image of the man who now lives in heaven. We will be raised from the dead like Jesus, the second Adam.

There is one more thing that Paul wants us to know. It is impossible for any human being to exist in the kingdom of God in our present flesh and blood, perishable, mortal body. We must all be changed. And that is exactly what is going to happen. We will not be resuscitated, like a patient whose heart has stopped but who is brought back by putting those electric paddles on his chest. We will not simply be given back these perishing bodies like Jesus gave Lazarus back his perishable body. We will be transformed. Paul now tells us a mystery (v.51). By mystery Paul does not mean something hard to figure out but rather something that God did not tell us until the coming of Christ. The thing that we now know that was not known before is that that not every Christian is going to die physically before they are changed. Some will die and then be changed and some will not die but go immediately from this natural existence into their spiritual bodies. This will happen "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." The transformation of dead and living Christians will happen instantaneously, when Jesus returns. This must (v.53) happen because just as God has determined the form in which all created bodies exist now, so he has determined that all who share in the new creation must put on imperishable, immortal bodies.

*Death was defeated when God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore...*

- *The resurrection of all believers is inevitable*
- *The future will be like the present only different*
- *And therefore...*

### **III. There is nothing to fear (vv. 54-58)**

In v. 54 Paul restates what we have been saying: When Christ returns and every believer, whether dead or living is changed, that is, their perishing, mortal bodies are instantaneously transformed into imperishable, immortal bodies, at that time death will be dead. He quotes and changes a little bit a verse from Isaiah 25 which we had read for us earlier. “Death will be swallowed up in victory.” By raising us from the dead Christ will place death under his feet. Death will no longer rule over us but we, through Christ, will reign over death. We will have the victory, not death. Then in v. 55, Paul quotes Hosea 13:14 which contains two rhetorical questions but he changes their meaning. In Hosea they form part of God’s declaration that he is going to destroy Israel for their sins. But here, Paul uses them as a taunt. Like a victorious warrior on the field of battle he taunts our enemy death: “Where is your victory now, O death? Where is your venomous sting now, O death?” Death is an impotent enemy. It is a lion with its teeth pulled and its claws extracted. The stinger has been pulled and it cannot harm those who are in Christ anymore. Like Will Smith taunting the unconscious alien whose space ship has just crashed in the movie, “Independence Day”, so Paul taunts conquered death. Death has no power over the dead or the living who are in Christ.

In v. 56 Paul inserts a line that appears to be out of place. The certainty that death is powerless is shown by the fact that Christ was raised from the dead. However, there is more to the work of Christ than just resurrection. The reason that death was a wasp to be feared is because of the venom in its sting. The poison in the sting of death was our sin. Physical death is for all who are in Adam and not in Christ the beginning of the experience of God’s eternal condemnation for your sins. The reason that the stinger has been removed from death is because Christ was stung with the poison we deserved. He took out the stinger by his death for our sins and we know this is true because of the resurrection. The reason that sin is what makes death fearful and powerful is because of the law. God is a holy and just God. He is a God who commands obedience. The law of God proves that we are sinners who deserve to go to hell forever. Eternal death is God’s just and good sentence against lawbreakers like us. Jesus by his obedience to that law and by his suffering the sentence of death decreed by God’s law has emptied death of its power. So praise God, as Paul says in v. 57, who has given us victory over sin and law and death through our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul ends this glorious description of our glorious and certain future by explaining how this knowledge should make a difference in our lives now. First, be steadfast and immovable. As you see the inevitable approach of death, as you experience the death of those you love, as you are assaulted by the numerous voices telling you that living for a future resurrection is foolishness: don’t move. Stand. As the threat of loss and death itself rushes upon you, do not fear. You cannot be harmed. Be like soldiers on the field of battle faced with the onslaught of an overwhelming enemy force who stand firm because they know that, like the German army in WWII, your enemy is out of gas, ammunition and food. While it appears powerful, it is impotent and cannot harm you. Do not waver. Hold fast to Christ and to the certain hope of resurrection.

Then Paul tells us to not only be immovable but also to keep living like Christians. Don’t retreat into an isolated, self-protective cocoon. Keep loving people. Keep praying. Keep doing the work God has called you to do. Keep doing good. Keep bearing witness to the glory of our resurrected Savior. Do all this because you know that everything matters. Every word, every act, every thought counts because there is a resurrection coming. Thoughtful people, both Christians and non-Christians recognize that death calls into question everything we do. What is the point of doing anything when one day you are going to turn to dust? King Solomon wrote in his description of life lived as a son of Adam, “All is vanity. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ...the wise dies like the fool. So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, 2:16-17).” However, Paul answers Solomon’s assertion that all is vanity. Nothing is vain because you will one day rise from the dead. Your faith motivated life now will result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Standing firm in Christ now, continuing to do the work the Lord has called you to do now will matter in the end because Jesus is coming again and there is going to be a resurrection from the dead. You are going to continue living and so what you do now will make a difference in your future life.

In our church we will have married five couples by the end of 2009. Scott and Kathy Borgwardt, Andy and Vanessa Drozdowicz, Steve and Julie Damon, Jordan and Stephanie Swanson and on December 19, Paul Martin and Bethany Meyer will have been married this year. In each case, once the couple was engaged to be married and a date for the wedding was set a whole host of decisions and actions took place. Premarital counseling was begun, the wedding party was formed, receptions were planned, the wedding service was organized, all sorts of work took place. Was any of that work in vain, worthless, pointless? All of it mattered because there was a wedding and a married life that followed. All of those decisions and actions, while at the time often felt stressful and their value may have been questioned, when the wedding came and the marriage began, all was seen to have been worthwhile. The value of those preparations was only fully experienced on the wedding day and in the married life. So it is with our lives. There is a wedding day coming, when we will be given new bodies and will move in with our Savior into the new heavens and the new earth. All that you do now is in preparation for that day. It all matters, so “keep abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

*Death was defeated when God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore...*

- *The resurrection of all believers is inevitable*
- *The future will be like the present only different*
- *There is nothing to fear*

© Copyright 2009 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. [mail@riverhillsonline.org](mailto:mail@riverhillsonline.org)