

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Corinthians 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Corinthians 15 is the most sustained and theologically dense treatment of the resurrection in the entire New Testament. Paul opens by reciting the gospel he delivered — Christ died for sins, was buried, rose on the third day, and appeared to a sequence of witnesses culminating in Paul himself (vv. 1–11). From this established historical foundation, he pivots to expose a crisis in Corinth: some are saying there is no resurrection of the dead (v. 12). Paul dismantles this position not by assertion but by consequence — if there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then the gospel is void, apostolic witness is false, faith is futile, sins are unforgiven, and the dead in Christ have perished (vv. 13–19). The stakes could not be higher.

Paul then reframes the entire argument around Christ as the *firstfruits* of the resurrection harvest — his rising is not an isolated miracle but the first installment of a cosmic event that will sweep up all who belong to him (vv. 20–28). Death entered through a man; resurrection comes through a man. As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. The resurrection is not one article among many — it is the event by which Christ abolishes every competing rule, authority, and power, and delivers the kingdom to the Father. God will be all in all. Paul then presses the ethical and practical absurdity of denying resurrection — if the dead are not raised, baptism for the dead makes no sense, apostolic suffering makes no sense, and hedonism becomes rational (vv. 29–34).

The chapter then turns to the mechanics of the resurrection body (vv. 35–49). Paul uses the seed-and-body analogy to demonstrate that continuity and transformation are not contradictions — what goes into the ground is not what emerges. Different glories illustrate degrees of differentiation in God's creative order. The present body is perishable, dishonored, weak, natural (*psychikon*); the resurrection body is imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual (*pneumatikon*). As we bore the image of the man of dust, we shall bear the image of the man of heaven. The chapter closes with the great eschatological announcement: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom, but at the last trumpet all will be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Death is swallowed up in victory. Its sting — sin — has been removed by Christ. Its power — the law — has been satisfied. Therefore, the final word is not doxology but commission: be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing your labor is not in vain.

This Text — Intent:

Paul is not writing a theological treatise for its own sake. He is addressing a congregation where denial of bodily resurrection was generating spiritual instability — affecting how

people understood their present suffering, their present ethics, and the meaning of their Christian labor. God's intent through this passage is to anchor the believer's entire present existence — hope, endurance, ethics, and mission — in the certainty of the bodily resurrection of Christ and the resurrection that follows from it. The intent is not merely to correct a doctrinal error but to produce a community whose daily life, suffering, and work are made intelligible and energized by a resurrection-shaped view of reality. The closing imperative (v. 58) is not an addendum — it is the goal. The doctrine is the engine; the life of steadfast labor is the destination.

Subject Sentence: Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits that guarantees the full harvest — transforming every dimension of present life.

Primary Claim: Because Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, the resurrection is not a doctrine to be defended but a reality to be inhabited — the certain ground on which believers endure suffering, resist sin, and labor without fear that their work will perish with them.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of the Resurrection Body — Spiritual vs. Physical:

The most significant interpretive divergence concerns the nature of the resurrection body in vv. 35–49, particularly Paul's contrast between the *psychikon* (natural/soulish) body and the *pneumatikon* (spiritual) body. Some interpreters, especially in Gnostic-adjacent and certain charismatic readings, take *pneumatikon* to mean non-material — a purely spiritual existence without physical substance. This reading is directly contradicted by the passage's own analogy: a seed does not cease to be physical matter when it becomes a plant — it is *transformed*, not dissolved. Paul insists on continuity (“it is sown... it is raised”) alongside transformation. The resurrection of Christ himself — the firstfruits — is the controlling precedent: the risen Jesus ate, was touched, bore the wounds of crucifixion, and occupied space, while also transcending previous physical limitations. *Pneumatikon* does not mean non-material; it means governed by and animated by the Spirit rather than by the old Adamic nature. The Reformed reading insists on **transformed bodily continuity** — same body, different glory — which is the only reading that makes the seed-body analogy work, that coheres with Christ's resurrection, and that grounds Paul's ethical imperatives.

Verse 29 — Baptism for the Dead:

This is one of the most contested verses in the New Testament. Roman Catholic interpreters have used it to support prayers and sacramental acts on behalf of the dead.

The Latter-day Saints practice a literal vicarious baptism ritual derived from it. Most Protestant interpreters — Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist — resist both readings, noting that Paul neither endorses nor commands the practice; he merely cites it as an argument *ad hominem* against the Corinthians’ own apparent practice. His point is rhetorical: *even if you do this, why do it if there is no resurrection?* The verse is not a doctrinal endorsement of posthumous sacramentalism. It is a logical lever. The Reformed reading acknowledges the genuine mystery of the verse’s precise referent while insisting the argument’s point is clear: some practice the Corinthians themselves valued presupposed resurrection, making their denial of it self-contradictory. Do not build doctrine on this verse; use it as Paul uses it — rhetorically, within the argument.

The Scope of “All” in Verses 22 and 28 — Universal Salvation:

Some universalist interpreters press vv. 22 (“so also in Christ shall all be made alive”) and 28 (“that God may be all in all”) into a doctrine of universal final restoration. This reading fails on the passage’s own terms. In v. 22, Paul has already qualified “all” by the phrase “each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (v. 23) — the resurrection harvest is specifically of those *in Christ*. Verse 24 then refers to Christ delivering the kingdom after destroying every enemy — which implies judgment, not universal restoration. “God will be all in all” (v. 28) refers to the completion of Christ’s mediatorial reign and the Father’s sovereign supremacy over all creation — including a defeated and judged rebellion — not to the salvation of all persons. The Reformed reading qualifies the universalist reading: the scope of v. 22 is defined by the “in Christ” — the firstfruits-and-harvest logic applies to the redeemed.

The Resurrection and Physical Creation — Dispensational Tension:

Classic dispensationalism distinguishes sharply between the resurrection of Israel and the resurrection/rapture of the Church, sometimes treated as separate events with separate resurrections. Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15 does not support this compartmentalization — the logic of firstfruits and harvest is presented as a single, unified resurrection event anchored in Christ’s rising. While the Reformed reading does not require all eschatological details to be resolved, the passage’s unified framework — one firstfruits, one harvest, one last trumpet, one transformation — resists the fragmented eschatology of strict dispensationalism. Acknowledge the dispensational concern for Israel’s distinct covenant role without conceding the resurrection-splitting framework the passage does not support.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 5:12–21** — The Adam-Christ typology in vv. 21–22 is directly grounded here. Death entered through one man’s trespass; life and resurrection come through one man’s obedience. The firstfruits logic requires the Adamic fall as its backdrop.

- **Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14** — Paul’s victory cry in vv. 54–55 quotes both — “Death is swallowed up in victory” (Isaiah) and “O death, where is your sting?” (Hosea). The resurrection is the fulfillment of Israel’s prophetic hope for the defeat of death, embedded in the covenant promises. Paul is reading the resurrection as the moment Isaiah and Hosea foresaw.
- **Psalms 110:1; Psalm 8:6** — Both are cited in vv. 25–27 to ground Christ’s present reign and ultimate subjugation of all enemies, including death. The resurrection is not the end of the story — it inaugurates the reign that ends with all enemies under his feet and the kingdom delivered to the Father.
- **John 11:25–26; John 20:1–29** — Christ’s “I am the resurrection and the life” grounds the firstfruits claim. The resurrection appearance narratives establish the precedent: the risen body is continuous, physical, transformed — the pattern for what 1 Corinthians 15 promises. Thomas’s encounter (“my Lord and my God”) is the doxological correlate to Paul’s “Death is swallowed up in victory.”
- **Philippians 3:20–21; Romans 8:18–25** — Paul elsewhere develops the same resurrection hope in terms of transformation of the lowly body into the image of Christ’s glorious body, and the whole creation’s groaning as it awaits the revelation of the children of God. These passages show 1 Corinthians 15 is not an isolated argument but the center of Paul’s entire eschatological framework.

Aim: To so ground the reader in the bodily resurrection of Christ as historical event, theological foundation, and personal guarantee that present suffering, ethical seriousness, and Christian labor become intelligible, urgent, and unshakeable.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he preached — which they received, stand in, and are being saved by, unless they believed in vain	“Holding fast” language implies danger of drift; “believed in vain” may refer to empty belief without content, not loss of salvation
3–5	The gospel core: Christ died for sins according to the Scriptures; was buried; rose on the third day according to the Scriptures; appeared to	“According to the Scriptures” (×2) — the resurrection is not a surprise but the fulfillment of the entire OT covenant structure

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6–8	Cephas, then to the Twelve Extended witness list: 500 brothers (most still alive), James, all the apostles, then Paul — “as to one untimely born”	The sheer number and contemporaneity of witnesses is a forensic argument; Paul’s own apostleship is evidence
9–11	Paul’s self-assessment: least of the apostles, formerly a persecutor; but by God’s grace he worked harder than all — yet not him but the grace of God within him	Establishes that the resurrection-gospel is the source of apostolic labor — anticipating v. 58
12	The crisis stated: some in Corinth say there is no resurrection of the dead	The problem is not merely abstract denial but a live teaching within the congregation
13–15	If no resurrection → Christ not raised → apostolic witness is false	Paul moves from local Corinthian error to cosmic stakes immediately
16–19	If Christ not raised → faith futile → still in sins → the dead have perished → Christians most pitiable of all	The consequences of denying resurrection are stacked systematically; the gospel is not separable from the resurrection
20	“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”	Pivot verse — the <i>de facto</i> of the resurrection reframes everything that follows; <i>aparché</i> (firstfruits) is the governing metaphor of the chapter’s second movement
21–22	Death through a man; resurrection through a man; in Adam all die; in Christ all made alive	Adam-Christ typology grounding the universality of death and the specificity of resurrection hope for those in Christ
23–24	The order: Christ the firstfruits; then at his coming those who belong to Christ; then the end — kingdom delivered to the Father after	The resurrection is not a single point event but a staged eschatological sequence

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	destroying every rule, authority, and power	
25–28	Christ must reign until all enemies are placed under his feet; the last enemy to be destroyed is death; then the Son himself will be subjected to the Father — God will be all in all	Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8:6 cited; the resurrection inaugurates the reign that ends in total divine supremacy
29	“What do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead?” — rhetorical argument from Corinthian practice	Paul does not endorse the practice; uses it as an <i>ad hominem</i> to expose the self-contradiction of denying resurrection
30–32	Why do apostles face danger every hour? Why does Paul die daily? “What do I gain if...I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”	The ethical stakes: resurrection makes suffering coherent; its denial collapses into hedonism; quotes Isaiah 22:13
33–34	“Do not be deceived: bad company ruins good morals.” Wake up from your drunken stupor; stop sinning; some lack knowledge of God	The doctrinal error is already producing moral compromise and relational contagion
35	The objector’s question: “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”	Paul introduces the mechanics question — which he treats as revealing a failure of imagination, not a genuine philosophical problem
36–38	The seed analogy: what you sow does not come to life unless it dies; God gives each seed its own body	Death is not termination but transformation; continuity through the ground is the point
39–41	Different kinds of flesh; different glories (sun, moon, stars) — differentiation	The analogy extends: God is not constrained to one mode of embodied

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	within God's creative order	existence; the resurrection body is a new order of glory
42–44	The contrast stated directly: sown perishable / raised imperishable; sown in dishonor / raised in glory; sown in weakness / raised in power; sown a natural body / raised a spiritual body	<i>Psychikon</i> vs. <i>pneumatikon</i> — governed by the Adamic nature vs. governed by the Spirit; both are bodily, both are real
45–49	First Adam became a living being; last Adam became a life-giving spirit. The natural comes first, then the spiritual. We bore the image of the man of dust; we shall bear the image of the man of heaven	Adam-Christ typology applied to the two-body contrast; the resurrection body is Christomorphic — shaped after his resurrection body
50	"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable"	Not a denial of bodily resurrection but a statement that the <i>present</i> perishable body cannot enter the coming order without transformation
51–52	"We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet"	The mystery: some will be alive at the Parousia; transformation is universal and instantaneous for the living and the dead
53–54	The perishable must put on the imperishable; the mortal must put on immortality — then Isaiah 25:8 is fulfilled	The language of <i>ependyomai</i> (putting on) implies the same person receiving a new mode of existence — continuity and transformation
55–57	"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" — Hosea 13:14 cited; the sting of death is sin; the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God who gives us the victory	The victory over death is grounded specifically in the removal of sin's guilt and the law's condemnation — resurrection presupposes atonement

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
58	through our Lord Jesus Christ “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain”	The “therefore” is load-bearing: the entire chapter’s theology produces this one practical command; the conclusion is missional, not merely doxological

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–11	The Gospel Delivered: Historical Foundation and Witnessed Fact
2	12–19	The Crisis and Its Consequences: If Christ Has Not Been Raised
3	20–28	The Pivot: Firstfruits and the Resurrection Sequence
4	29–34	The Absurdity of Denial: Suffering, Ethics, and the Collapse into Hedonism
5	35–49	The Resurrection Body: Continuity, Transformation, and the Image of Heaven
6	50–57	The Last Trumpet: Mystery, Victory, and the Defeat of Death
7	58	The Therefore: Steadfast Labor as the Fruit of Resurrection Hope

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits that guarantees the full harvest — transforming every dimension of present life.

Primary Claim: Because Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, the resurrection is not a doctrine to be defended but a reality to be inhabited — the certain ground on which believers endure suffering, resist sin, and labor without fear that their work will perish with them.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Examine what your actual functional belief about the resurrection is doing to the rest of your life.

Paul's argument assumes that what you believe about the resurrection is not a compartmentalized doctrinal position — it governs your ethics, your relationships, your suffering, and your sense of whether your work matters. If you find that you are shrinking back from costly Christian commitment, that you are quietly calculating whether sacrifice is worth it, or that the thought of death produces mainly dread rather than hope, the issue is not courage or discipline — it is what you actually believe about what happens after death. First Corinthians 15 demands that you audit your functional eschatology, not just your stated theology. The question is not “do you affirm the resurrection?” but “is the resurrection doing the work in you that Paul says it should?”

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Let the victory announcement of verses 55–57 land as actual news, not liturgical familiarity.

“O death, where is your sting?” has become so familiar in Christian usage that it can pass through the ear without touching the heart. Paul is quoting Hosea into the middle of a practical pastoral letter because he wants the Corinthians — and every reader — to feel the weight of what has been removed. The sting of death is sin. The power of sin is the law. Both of these have been answered in Christ's resurrection. This is not poetic flourish — it is the announcement that the two things that make death terrifying (guilt and condemnation) have already been dealt with. Sit with this. Grieve what your sin deserved. Then receive the victory announcement as actual news from outside yourself, not as a sentiment you are generating.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Choose one arena of Christian labor you have pulled back from and re-engage it on the basis of verse 58's guarantee.

Paul does not close the chapter with a call to believe harder or feel more. He closes with a command: be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord — *because* your labor is not in vain. The resurrection makes Christian work permanently non-futile. Whatever you have planted, whatever you have endured, whatever you have poured out in service, teaching, prayer, or witness — none of it evaporates. Identify the specific place where weariness or discouragement has caused you to pull back, and re-engage it not on the basis of renewed enthusiasm but on the basis of the resurrection guarantee: your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) Understand that the resurrection body is yours — continuous with who you are now, transformed into what you were made to be.

The seed analogy in vv. 36–44 is not abstract biology — it is personal promise. The person who is sown is the person who is raised, in the same way that the seed that goes into the ground is the plant that comes up. You will be you — not a version of you, not a spiritual echo of you, but you, bearing the image of the man of heaven the way you now bear the image of the man of dust. This means your resurrection is not an escape from embodied existence but its fulfillment. The degradations your body currently experiences — illness, aging, mortality — are the seed form. They are not the final word. Reframe your relationship to your body accordingly: neither despising it (it will be raised) nor idolizing it (it will be transformed).

5. (*Affections/Worship*) Feel the full weight of vv. 13–19 — and let relief, not just information, be your response to the resurrection.

Paul lines up the consequences of no resurrection with systematic force: gospel void, witnesses liars, faith futile, sins unforgiven, the dead perished, Christians most pitiable. He does this not to depress but to inoculate — by feeling the full darkness of the alternative, the “But in fact” of v. 20 strikes with its full force. Christ has been raised. Which means: the gospel is not void. The witnesses were not liars. Your faith is not futile. Your sins are forgiven. The dead in Christ have not perished. You are not most pitiable — you are most certain. Allow this relief to move through you as a genuine emotional response to historical fact, not a theological exercise. The resurrection is good news because the alternative was catastrophic.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Corinthians 15 establishes that the bodily resurrection of Christ is not one article of faith among many but the structural load-bearing wall of the entire gospel. Paul’s chain of consequences in vv. 13–19 demonstrates that every other Christian claim — forgiveness, justification, apostolic authority, the validity of faith itself — stands or falls with the resurrection. The chapter also establishes the resurrection as a cosmic and teleological event, not merely a personal survival narrative: Christ’s rising inaugurates a reign that will result in the subjugation of every competing power, the destruction of death itself, and the delivery of all things to the Father, who will be all in all. The resurrection is therefore simultaneously historical (an event with dated witnesses), personal (those in Christ will be raised), and cosmic (the mechanism by which God’s sovereign purposes are completed over all creation). The passage also grounds resurrection hope in atonement — “the sting of death is sin, the power of sin is the law” (v. 56) — which means the resurrection cannot be preached apart from the cross. The victory over death presupposes the satisfying of law and the removal of guilt; without this, resurrection is spectacle, not salvation.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First Corinthians 15 is a defining passage for the Reformed emphasis on the *total* gospel — that salvation is not merely personal and spiritual but eschatological and bodily, encompassing the whole person and, through the resurrection sequence, the whole created order. The firstfruits-and-harvest logic reflects the covenantal structure of salvation: Christ’s resurrection is not a private event but the representative act of the last Adam on behalf of all who are in him — a structure that resonates directly with the Reformation’s insistence on union with Christ as the ground of all soteriological benefits. The chapter’s closing commission (v. 58) is the Reformed antidote to both quietism and despair: the resurrection does not remove believers from the world of labor but anchors their labor in permanent significance. Because Christ is raised, the work of kingdom building is not rearranging deck chairs — it is sowing seed whose harvest is guaranteed. The passage also guards against the perennial temptation to reduce the gospel to a therapy for present felt needs: the Primary Claim of this chapter is not “Christ makes your life better now” but “Christ’s resurrection has already secured the final victory, and you are invited to live from that certainty today.” This is grace — not assistance, but total transformation anchored in an act of God in history.

Main Takeaway

Christ has actually been raised from the dead — not symbolically, not spiritually, not metaphorically — and his resurrection is the firstfruits of yours. Every fear you carry about death, every question about whether your suffering matters, every weariness in Christian labor has already been answered: your sting has been removed, your guilt has been atoned, and your work in the Lord will not evaporate. Stop living as though the resurrection were a future hope that has no traction in the present. It is the most stable ground you are standing on.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the resurrection as merely one article among many, rather than the structural center of the gospel.** The common temptation is to preach v. 58 as an encouragement sermon without doing the heavy lifting of vv. 1–57. Paul’s “therefore” in v. 58 only carries force if the resurrection case has been built. A sermon that jumps to “be steadfast” without grounding it in the firstfruits argument produces moralism, not resurrection-fueled endurance. The imperative has no power without the indicative it depends on.

- **Spiritualizing the resurrection body to avoid the embarrassment of the physical.** Some preachers, uncomfortable with the particularity of bodily resurrection, soften vv. 35–49 into a metaphor for spiritual transformation. This dismantles the entire argument. Paul explicitly insists on the *soma* (body) throughout — what is sown is a body, what is raised is a body. The transformation is real, but so is the continuity. Preaching that leaves listeners unsure whether they will be physically raised has not preached 1 Corinthians 15.
- **Using v. 29 to open a doctrinal can of worms rather than tracking Paul’s actual argument.** The temptation is to spend significant time reconstructing what the Corinthian practice of “baptism for the dead” was, when Paul’s point is entirely rhetorical. He is not endorsing the practice; he is using it as a mirror to expose the Corinthians’ self-contradiction. Get in and out of v. 29 quickly. If you spend a third of your sermon on this verse, you have followed Paul’s aside rather than his argument.
- **Reducing v. 58 to a generic motivational appeal disconnected from resurrection.** “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” is frequently quoted as a generic call to Christian effort. But the operative phrase is “knowing that in the *Lord* your labor is not in vain” — the guarantee of non-futility comes specifically from the resurrection. Without that grounding, v. 58 is an inspirational slogan. With it, it is one of the most radical things Paul ever said: no Christian work, however invisible or costly or apparently fruitless, will prove to have been wasted. Preach that specific claim, not the generic call to effort.
- **Missing the atonement content embedded in vv. 55–57.** “The sting of death is sin; the power of sin is the law” is often passed over quickly as a rhetorical flourish before the doxology of v. 57. But Paul is here embedding the logic of the atonement inside the resurrection announcement: the reason the resurrection defeats death is that sin — death’s sting — has been addressed through Christ’s atoning work, and the law — sin’s power — has been satisfied. The resurrection without the cross is a miracle. The resurrection *with* the cross is victory. Preachers who celebrate the victory of v. 57 without explaining the mechanism of vv. 55–56 have described the trophy without explaining the game.
- **Preaching the chapter’s eschatology without landing on present ethical traction.** First Corinthians 15 contains some of Paul’s most concentrated eschatological teaching, and it is possible to preach it as a detailed map of end-times events without ever asking what it demands of the congregation this week. Paul does not conclude with a map — he concludes with a command. The eschatology is in service of the ethics. A sermon that leaves people with a fuller picture of the resurrection sequence but no transformed orientation toward their present suffering, labor, or sin has preached the content without the intent.