

August 27 Lesson: God's Kingdom Will Be All in All

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 3: God's Eternal Reign

Sunday School Lesson for the week of August 27, 2023 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Key Verse:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:28)

Lesson Aims

- To begin connecting today's lesson with the overall summer focus on God's reign
- To begin understanding the reign of God in the context of the Church's resurrection tradition
- To explore Christ's resurrection as the first fruit in a series of resurrections and implications
- To delve deeper into our belief in the promise of resurrection for believers
- To connect the resurrection to the return of Christ and the reign of God in Christ
- To examine the image of the enemies of God's reign being brought into subjection
- To understand more about the co-reign of God and Christ
- To reflect on the time when Christ subjects himself to God and hands over the kingdom
- To contemplate the meaning of Creation's completion, the end of time, and beginning of eternity

When God's Kingdom Encompasses All in All

This last lesson of the summer quarter serves as a most fitting conclusion to the theme of "God's Righteous Reign." At the beginning of this series, we recognized that the reign of God, or kingdom of God, is a recurring theme running through the Bible. Not only does the theme keep coming up again and again, we see the theme being developed in beautiful and meaningful ways across the centuries as the biblical story unfolds.

There is something all-encompassing about the nature and scope of God's kingdom. We understand that God's desire is to bring all that God created under God's rule. There is the matter of free will, however. Forces exist that are opposed to God's kingdom. The story of bringing all into the blessing of God's kingdom is therefore a story of creation's ongoing and ultimate redemption. At the heart of this story is God's relentless love, and the belief that God wins in the end. There is something powerful and winsome about this story of God's reign.

The scripture passage we are studying takes us to the core of this story. In a way, we go back in time to the Resurrection of Jesus, then back further still to Adam, then forward to the future

return of Christ. We get a look behind the curtain, so to speak, to learn what God has been up to, and what God's plans are between now and the future return of Christ when God's reign will be complete. We learn what "complete" even means. The more we are able to take in, the more breathtaking it is.

The Reign of God in the Context of the Resurrection

First Corinthians 15 is often called "The Resurrection Chapter," and for good reason. The 19 verses that lead up to our scripture passage are about the resurrection, and the 30 verses that come after the passage we are studying continue to talk about the implications of the resurrection (58 verses in all).

In the first 19 verses, Paul makes the case that our faith in Christ is very much an Easter faith. Faith in Jesus without a belief in his resurrection is not just faith in a story without its last chapter, it is no faith at all. Paul was concerned that not every believer in Corinth had accepted the resurrection as an article of their Christian faith. Paul was referring both to their belief in Jesus' own resurrection and their belief in the prospect of their own resurrection and the resurrection of their fellow believers.

Paul reminded the church in Corinth of the resurrection tradition that had been handed down to them through Paul. Paul characterized this tradition as being of "first importance." What Paul recalled for them sounds like it could have been a litany with which they would have been familiar. Paul reminded them that what he had handed to them was what he had first received from the larger community of faith:

"that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas and the twelve." (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

Notice that the resurrection tradition was understood to be grounded "in accordance with the scriptures." The mention of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to Cephas and the twelve seeks to establish the truth of Jesus' resurrection through the eyewitnesses, which was also a part of the resurrection tradition. The list of eyewitnesses continued:

"Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,
most of whom are still alive, though some have died.
Then, he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." (1 Corinthians 15:6-7)

When Paul mentioned the five hundred eyewitnesses to a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, we are hearing of an event not recorded in the gospels or the book of Acts or any other epistle in the New Testament. Yet, we understand that this event was being recalled in this litany that was handed down through the Church. In other words, Paul included it because the Corinthians would not have been hearing about this appearance by Jesus for the first time. It was a well-established point of information in the resurrection tradition.

Notice that these appearances are recalled in their specific order, as if the church understood that the order was important. Jesus seems to have planned his own revealing. Have you wondered why Jesus did not appear to Pontius Pilate or Herod Antipas or Caesar?

It appears as if Jesus limited his appearances, between his resurrection and his ascension, to those who already belonged to the community of faith. Jesus appeared to those who already *wanted* to believe on some level. Jesus wanted faith to play the dominant role in how people relate to him. He did not overwhelm the world with physical evidence so that faith was not required. Jesus did not want people to merely give mental assent to him and the fact of his resurrection. Jesus wanted people to believe in him and wanted that belief to be based on a relationship with him.

To the list of appearances, Paul added his own autobiographical note: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:8) Paul added Jesus’ appearance to him on the road to Damascus approximately three years after Jesus’ ascension. Paul reminded them of his own story where he had been persecuting the church until he met the risen Christ. In other words, Paul was offering to them the dramatic transformation of his own life as proof of the risen Christ.

Believing in Jesus’ own resurrection constitutes just part of our resurrection faith. Apparently, there were some who believed that *Jesus* was raised from the dead, but they denied “the resurrection of the dead”—in other words, the resurrection of believers. For Paul, this amounted to a denial of Jesus’ own resurrection: “*For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*” (1 Corinthians 15:16-19)

What do you think of the idea that the Christian faith is an Easter faith? What do you think the resurrection tradition tells you that you had not thought of before? What do you make of the order of Jesus’ appearances? What is to be pitied about one’s hope in Christ being limited to this life only?

The Original Intention that Jesus’ Resurrection Was to Be the First in a Series

This is the point in the 15th chapter where we begin to examine our selected scripture passage.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

“First fruits” is an agricultural metaphor referring to the first of a crop to be harvested. “First fruits” means that there is more to be harvested. In other words, “first fruits” means the first in a series. “First fruits” implies that Jesus’ resurrection guaranteed the promise of more resurrection. Just two simple words, “first fruits,” speak volumes about the beauty of the Christian Story.

It was Jesus’ original intention to share the victory of the sacrificial offering of himself over the specter of sin and death. Self-giving love wins. Jesus willingness to die a horrible death on a

cross for our atonement is of one piece with Jesus' desire to share the fruits of his resurrection with us. All of it speaks of grace—God's unmerited favor toward us.

Moreover, this all occurred "in accordance with the scriptures." As we know, Jesus could have let the cup of death pass from him in the garden of Gethsemane, but Jesus understood that he was committing himself to an action that had eternal consequences.

²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being, ²² for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Paul's reference to Adam ties Jesus' sacrificial death and the sharing of his resurrection to the beginning of redemption history. Death and mortality became a part of the human condition through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In the Incarnation, Jesus took on the form of a human servant so that through his ministry, death, and resurrection, he could make right what had gone wrong in the human story. This was Jesus' destiny. His death and resurrection were *intended* to become the lynchpins in God's redemptive work throughout human history. Jesus died and rose again for our salvation and his heavenly Father's glorification. "*For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*"

Jesus' sacrificial death sowed the seeds, and the power of the resurrection is what grew from those seeds. Jesus' own resurrection constitutes the first fruits of the resurrection, and the resurrection of believers constitutes a continuation of that harvest. But there's more.

How does Easter make right what had gone wrong in the human story? Practically speaking, how do you imagine all being made alive in Christ?

The Continuation of the Harvest of Jesus' Resurrection

In verses 3 through 7, a definite order seemed to emerge in the resurrection appearances of Jesus. In the next verse, we see this focus on the order of events as the continuation of the harvest unfolds.

²³ But each in its own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

With these words, "each in its own order," we know that there is more to unfold. There are more repercussions to flow from Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' resurrection comprises the first fruits. We are given the wonderful news that these repercussions will bless those who belong to Christ.

The next words that jump out for us in verse 23 are, "then at his coming." Paul shifts the focus in time to the future. When Paul refers to the coming of Christ, we know that the first coming of Jesus, his birth in Bethlehem, had already occurred. The coming of Christ to which Paul is referring is Jesus' second coming. Another way of referring to the second coming of Christ is to speak of the return of Christ.

We live between Jesus' first coming and his eventual return. At his first coming two thousand years ago, Jesus accomplished a work that continues to have implications for us all the way through to our present day. We know that forty days after the resurrection of Jesus, he ascended into heaven. It is from heaven that Jesus continues to reign beside the Father through the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit works in us and around us to bear witness to Christ and to advance Christ's reign. One of the points we are making is that Christ's work did not end when he went to heaven. This work is ongoing and is even building, despite appearances at times. We know that when Jesus returns, he will complete what he began at his first coming.

Paul also tells us that it is when Jesus returns that both the living and the dead who belong to Christ will be resurrected. There are two points of view concerning the resurrection of believers. One viewpoint is that there will be what is referred to as a "general resurrection" when all believers will be raised at once when Jesus returns. The other viewpoint is that believers are raised as soon as they die. The support for this latter viewpoint comes from Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8 where he speaks of being absent from the body and present with the Lord as soon as we die.

The Early Church was comfortable with the idea of a general resurrection because they felt that Jesus was going to return soon, during their lifetimes. When their loved ones, who belonged to the Lord, started dying before Jesus' return that caused some to be anxious. Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica that when Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise first. The early Christians imagined death to be like going to sleep, and then waking up before they knew it in the presence of the Lord.

Many believe that we go to be with the Lord immediately after we die, and that when the Lord returns, there will be something about the resurrection that we experience together. In any case, we should not fear that we or our loved ones languish in any way after death. We are talking about entering eternity where time is not experienced in the same way that we experience it now. Although there is mystery surrounding the resurrection of believers, we know that at the center of the experience is a loving Savior who "for the joy set before him endured the cross" so that we might be raised with him. But there's more.

What are your thoughts on the resurrection of believers? What do you think happens at the return of Christ related to the resurrection of the dead?

The Return of Christ in the Context of the Reign of God

Let's remember that Paul is in the middle of unpacking for us a series of events—*each in its own order*. First, Christ's resurrection, then, at his coming, the resurrection of those who belong to the Lord, who have not already been raised. The time of his coming, his return to earth, is when something else follows.

24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.

When Christ returns, we are told that time as we know it is coming to an end. The “end” is when Christ completes what he started at his first coming 2,000 years ago. The end comes when Christ has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power aligned against the reign of God. Once the powers that are opposed to the reign of God are defeated and subdued, then the Son will hand over the kingdom to God the Father.

25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

The 25th verse is an allusion to one of the most famous psalms written by King David. What makes the 110th Psalm so famous? It is famous for the amount of times it is quoted. The psalm begins, “The LORD says to my lord, | “Sit at my right hand | until I make your enemies your footstool.” Or, “Sit at my right hand until I put all your enemies under your feet.” It was a practice of ancient rulers for artisans to make footstools for the ruler of the land. The artisans would carve into the footstool images of the enemies they had conquered. It symbolized that the ruler had defeated, subdued, and put his enemies under his feet.

The belief that David enshrined in a psalm of praise to God was that God is subduing the enemies of the king that God has chosen to rule his people. In this image, God is the ultimate ruler for sure, but God has invited the king of his people to sit beside him as a co-ruler. In the case of a king like David, the king is not a co-equal ruler, but a co-ruler just the same by God’s design, choice, and invitation.

For God’s people, Psalm 110:1, had messianic overtones. They believed that the Messiah, the promised Son of David, the soon and returning king, was to be the fulfillment of Psalm 110:1. Jesus, himself, made a reference to this according to the gospels.

According to Paul in the 25th verse, Christ, who reigns at the right hand of the Father, must reign until all his enemies have been put under his feet. The enemies are rulers, authorities, and powers aligned against God.

26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Death is a power aligned against God’s reign and rule. You could say that death represents the greatest power aligned against the reign of God. Death is understood to be the ultimate consequence of the Fall of humankind. Death is the consequence of sin. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Revelation 20:14 makes a triumphant declaration when it announces that “Death and Hades” will one day “be thrown into the lake of fire.” Christ, through the power of the resurrection, is working to defeat death and all that is death-dealing.

I was recently handed a pulpit Bible to take to the Moore Museum on St Simons Island where the archives are kept for the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. This particular pulpit Bible was given to the local church where it was used in memory of one of its

local saints. In the dedication, it praises the work of this believer as a part of the Church Militant until he became a part of the Church Triumphant.

One of the enduring images of the Church is that of the Church Militant. The Church Militant is understood to be working with Christ as a part of his reign through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. The “militant” image is appropriate because we are talking about subduing the evil powers of this world. As Paul clarifies in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, the warfare that the church wages is not being waged with actual military hardware. He writes, “for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

The Church Militant becomes the Church Triumphant when Christ has destroyed every ruler, authority, and power of the enemy. Paul tells us that when this happens, then the end has come, and the Son hands the kingdom over to the Father. Paul digs into this amazing image further in the next verses.

What spiritual enemies do you think God is subduing? What are the death-dealing forces that you think will die along with death?

The Co-Reigns of God and Christ

We have already mentioned the co-reigns of God and Christ. In the next verses, Paul delves more deeply into this.

²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him.

God the Father has put all things in subjection under the feet of his Son, except himself. Here is the image of God and Christ co-ruling as One.

²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

When every enemy has been subdued, and when all things have been therefore subjected to Christ, then Christ, the Son, God’s Co-Ruler, will subject himself to the Father. At this time the Son will willingly and lovingly hand the kingdom over to the Father.

In this image, the curtain has been parted to allow us to see through a divine mystery and peer into the trinitarian life of God. When time gives way to eternity, we see that the Son who proceeds eternally from the Father, also lives to serve the Father throughout eternity, along with the Holy Spirit. It is within this eternal proceeding, serving, and loving action within the trinitarian life of God that we see the Oneness in God.

When every enemy has been subdued, when the Son has handed the kingdom over to the Father, and when the Son has subjected himself to the Father, then God will be all in all. God's reign will encompass all with all of God's own self.

Notice that when the scripture says, "then comes the end," it is referring to the end of time as we know it. So, then the "end" is also the beginning. The end of time is the beginning of eternity. The return of Christ brings about what we call the completion of Creation. We say that the purpose of Christ's return is to complete what Christ began with his first coming. What does "complete" mean? "Complete" means that the kingdom of God has taken in everything. God has become all in all.

Again, "complete" is the beginning of an eternity of completeness, complete fulfillment, complete contentment, complete peace, and complete joy for us. For God, "complete" means the complete glorification of God from God's subjects, which includes the whole of God's creation, including us, bringing glory to God. As the Westminster Confession says, "The chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

As we said at the beginning of today's study, this scripture lesson we have been given is the perfect way to conclude our focus on the "Righteous Reign of God." We have also learned that this focus on the reign of God is a part of our Easter faith. It flows from, and expands, our belief in the resurrection.

What do you think of the image of the Son serving the Father throughout eternity? How does this expand your thinking on the Trinity? In what ways do you feel that this lesson helps you put together what you have learned in this series about the reign of God? What will be your biggest takeaway from this series?

Prayer

Gracious God, You sent Your Son to reign with you through the Holy Spirit in the world and through the Church. Make us ever more sensitive to the leading of Christ, that we may be able to participate in His reign to the glory of Your name, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.