The guarantee of firstfruits

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

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**Scriptures:** Leviticus 23:9-14; 1 Corinthians 15:12-23

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 306, 309, 116, 312, 284, 301

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (HCLD17)

Theme: The bodily resurrection of Christ is a guarantee from God that all who belong to Him will likewise be raised to new life in resurrected bodies at His second coming.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, trust in God for your own bodily resurrection because you belong to the risen Christ.

**Introduction**

There is growing concern over global food security. Will there be enough to feed the world’s growing population? Will there be enough water to irrigate food crops? Will the changing climate result in reduced productivity? Will the agricultural harvests around the globe be plentiful enough?

In the spiritual realm there are even more serious questions to be asked: Will there really be a resurrection to new life in new bodies for all of those for whom Christ died at Calvary? Yes, most certainly. Is the blood of Christ sufficient for so many people? Yes, most certainly.

The coming spiritual harvest of souls is going to be plentiful because of the first portion of the harvest – Christ the firstfruits. Which brings us to our first point:

1. **Firstfruits – the resurrection of Christ**

The term ‘firstfruits’ is widely used in Scripture, both in the Old and New testaments. 31 verses contain this term in our ESV Bibles. ‘Firstfruits’ were the first portion of the harvest to come in time- the earliest part of the crop, wheat (Ex 34:2), or other grains (Lev 24:14), bread loaves (Lev 23:17), wine or oil (Num 18:12), the first fleece of a flock of shorn sheep (18.4), honey or any other agricultural produce (2 Chron 31:5). Firstfruits were an offering which honoured the Lord for his provision (Prov 3:9) and the finest portion of which were dedicated to Him: "*The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God*” (Ex 23:19). Jacob describes his firstborn son Reuben as being the ‘*firstfruits of my strength*’ (Gen 49:3). The Old Testament nation of Israel was the ‘firstfruit’ of the Lord’s coming holy harvest of people from all the nations (Jer 2:3).

The Feast of Firstfruits was instituted when the nation of Israel was still wandering in the wilderness, without land or crops (Ex 23:16). This harvest festival was observed in faith that God would lead the people to the land He had promised. By giving God the firstfruits, Israel acknowledged that all good things come from Him and that everything that they were blessed to be stewards of belonged, not to them, but to God. The giving the firstfruits was also a way of **expressing trust** in God’s provision; just as He provided the firstfruits, so He would provide the rest of the crop which was yet to come.

This is the rich background to the Apostle Paul’s statement in v20: Paul writes: “*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*”. Paul is stating that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Paul has already listed some of the eyewitnesses to this fact in verses 5-8: To Peter, the other apostles, to more than 500 at one time, to James, to Paul himself.

The resurrection of Christ resulted in the complete transformation of his dead flesh into a new type of body. It was still human, still flesh and blood, still recognizable as his body, but glorified, imperishable, forever changed. A physical body able to appear, and to disappear, able to move unseen from place to place (Luke 24:31,36) passing through locked doors (John 20:26). Not a ghostly body, but a material one: of flesh and bones. One which He invited His disciples to touch and see. One which bore the marks of the nails on his hands and feet, one into whose wounded side Thomas could place his finger. One which consumed food in their presence. Jesus was alive! and had left the tomb that Sunday morning in his glorified body, never to die again.

However, isn’t it true that Jesus had raised to life the dead bodies of the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 11:7-11), the young daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader (Luke 8:52-56) and his friend Lazarus of Bethany (John 11)? Yes. Isn’t it true that in Old Testament times, the prophet Elijah raised the widow of Zarephath’s son from the dead, and his successor, Elisha raised the Shunammite woman’s son from the dead (2 Kings 4:18-37)? Yes.

Why then does Paul refer to Christ as being the ‘*firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*’. Because Christ was raised from the dead never to die again whereas the widow of Zarephath’s son, the Shunammite’s son, the widow of Nain’s son, the young daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus all died again sometime after they were brought (temporarily) back to life. The resurrection of Christ was not the resuscitation of a dead body like that of those who had been raised back to life again, but the complete transformation of his body to live forever. His was the first body to be glorified, to be raised imperishable; never to die again.

Like the Old Testament firstfruit offerings made by Israel: Christ gave Himself up as a sacrifice to honour His Heavenly Father. Christ, in his humanity is the ‘finest’ portion of all humanity, unblemished by sin, perfect in all his ways, obedient to the point of death on a cross. By giving up himself as a kind of ‘firstfruit’ offering, Christ gives all who trust in Him a **guarantee** that there is an abundant harvest coming of those who will likewise be raised to life in new imperishable bodies, suited for an eternal existence.

Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Afterfruits – the resurrection of all who belong to Christ**

‘Firstfruits’ is a thoroughly Biblical term, whereas ‘afterfruits’ is most definitely not! Here I use the term to refer to those who are yet to be raised to eternal life in resurrected bodies, following Christ, the firstfruits: In our text Paul writes: “*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*”. In the [Bible](https://www.abibleaday.com/bible-dictionary/bible/), the phrase “fallen asleep” is used as a euphemism for dead, deceased, or died. It’s much the same as we might say “passed away,” “passed on,” or “passed” instead of using dead, deceased, died. (A euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing).

So Paul is saying that the resurrection of Christ is the first portion of a harvest of others who have died in Him. The result of Christ’s work on the cross is to be a resurrection to life of many others. In the same way that the sinful work of Adam spread down through all the generations following him so that we are all conceived in sin as natural rebels against God, so the sinless work of Christ, his dying for the sins of all God’s people, his resurrection on the third day, spread down through all generations of those who trust in Him for their salvation.

This ‘federal headship’ of Adam and Christ is expanded upon by Paul in Romans 5:12-19. “*The free gift by the grace of... one man Jesus Christ abounded for many*” v15; “*by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous*” v19; Here in 1 Cor 15:21-22 “*For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive*”. Christ reverses the destructive process begun in Adam (cf. Rom 5:12-14; 18-19) bring restoration and the construction of a new world.

This is a progressive work in unfolding history as Paul identifies in v23 “*But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ*”. Those “who belong to Christ” are his disciples, those who have turned away from the sins in repentance and turned to Jesus in faith, trusting that He died for their sins and that his perfect obedience has been credited to their account by God.

This guarantee of the coming resurrection of the bodies of all those who belong to Christ is confirmed by the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers. Paul writes in Rom 8:23 “*And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*”.

Brother and sisters, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit as God’s pledge of the blessings to come with our inheritance in the New Heavens and New Earth when Christ returns. These blessings include new bodies raised up imperishable and fit for the purpose of immortality in the new world to come.

Christ is God’s ‘firstfruits’ – His own pledge that there will be a full harvest of those who will be raised from the dead. In our text Paul is expressing a guarantee, a promise with certainty, an assurance for the future which is based on Christ’s resurrection from the dead. It is this guarantee which the HCLD17 brings out as the 3rd in a list of benefits which come to the children of God from Christ’s resurrection: “Third – Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of our glorious resurrection”.

Brothers and sisters, trust in God for your own bodily resurrection because you belong to the risen Christ. Be comforted when your physical strength grows less. Be comforted when you become less steady on your feet. Be comforted when your eyes don’t see as clearly as they used to. Be comforted when your ears don’t pick up sound as they once did. Be comforted when you are sick, in pain, or suffering from disease and decay. Be comforted because Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of your glorious resurrection to receive a new body. A physically strong resurrection body, with perfect balance, eyesight, hearing. A body which will not get sick, degrade or die as these perishable bodies do.

Just as the firstfruits of the agricultural harvest was once a promise of the afterfruits of the abundance to come, so Christ is the firstfruits of the bodily resurrection is a promise of the afterfruits of the abundance of the resurrection of God’s children to physical and spiritual life in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Praise God for the resurrection!

AMEN