



# “Then...the End”

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Then comes the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and [every] power...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 15:24*

“THEN...THE END.” ABOUT ENDINGS, WE ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH; ABOUT GAMES being finished when the clock runs down we know well; about assignments coming at last to their conclusion, we have ample experience; about a course of study, a span of weeks at last coming to the final day, the final exam, the final paper, the final grade, we have known them all. Such endings are not the end, they are merely endings, like the ending of another day to be succeeded by the next, which then will end. The endings never end. They are instances of just one more ending among the endless string of endings. About endings, we know well enough. We are collectors of endings duly recorded as cancelled checks, school transcripts, tax receipts, class notes, stubs of theater tickets, snapshots of the kids at the beach, college letters saved by mother. And what of our dying, is it not also just another ending added to the collected endings and marked by obituaries, tombstones, and flowers on the grave?

Our text, assigned for the ending of the church year, does not speak of endings, but of the end. “Then...the end.” The telos, the end, as in the usually neglected and fearful question: To what end, to what purpose, toward what consummation do all these endings go? Is there any point to these endings, these fi-

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nal papers which are only endings but not at all the end of it all? Endings are not the point, are not the goal, but do these continuing endings have a final end, not as in full-stop end but as in fulfillment of purpose? Do all the endings serve *the* end? "Then...the end." And when the end comes, will that end illuminate, throw light upon, make sense for, and justify the often weaving and seemingly endless parade of endings?

"Then...the end." How could this be? How could *the* end put an end to the threat of pointless endings? Can there be such as that which the apostle here calls *the* end? Have we not collected over all these centuries one catastrophic instance after another of proposed final ends, final solutions, final systems, final doctrines which have only added to the wreckage of false promises and deceit? "Then...the end." Can there be such as *the* end, which will end the specter, the haunting fear that all these endings are pointless?

If in our anxious, fearful contemplation about endings, we are moved to ask *what* will be the end of our endings, there will be no answer. Nothing. Nothing, because it is the wrong, and therefore unanswerable, question. But if we are moved to ask *who* will be the end of our endings, the text points us. Again, listen to the apostle, "Then...the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler, and every authority and [every] power." Then...the end. At the end there waits for us not the final solution, not the final system, but at the end there waits for us the One who has "destroyed every ruler, every authority, every power."

Be careful with that text. Oh, how we love to speak knowingly about rulers, about dominion, about authority, about power. And oh, how easily we think that the One who destroys every ruler, every authority, and every power will, of course, do *his* destroying work in the very way every ruler, every authority, and every power has done it—only more so. And so off we go, prattling on about God being in control, just as we would be in control if we were God.

And off we go, speaking about the authority of God over all other authorities by giving God more of the same kind of authority. Is the highest imaginable authority a five-star general, then God is—well—God has stars without number.

And what about power? Well, is it not all too obvious who has power over whom around here? And if you do not have enough power, then go find yourself someone with power who can empower you. And soon even the power of God becomes a commodity to be traded on the open market, only now God is the one who—as the *deus absconditus*—really has all the power, only it is all hidden away, and... and... then... the end.

When we read the text which begins, "Then...the end," let us be careful that we read it in such a way that, in the end, the power of God is the power of God, the jealous Lover, who dies of love, who dies of an eternal longing that all those whom God loves might live forever in love with God. When we read the text, be careful that the power of God not be rendered as the power of a jealous tyrant, who does not keep promises, who is not at heart generous in sharing power with all the

creatures whom God loves, but in the end takes back everything that God had ever given in love.

We can too easily become so mesmerized by our cramped and pinched ways of imagining the power of God, that we let our assumptions about power overwhelm and overpower even the story of Jesus, whose strong defiance of those in power sent him to his death. Our ways of imagining the power of God too easily trick us into thinking that the resurrection of Christ the crucified somehow canceled what God shows us of God's way in the life of Jesus, and turns the crucified Jesus into a resurrected ruthless overlord who behaves like the conquering Caesar of Rome rather than the suffering servant of God.

And our assumptions about power can even cause us to forget what the apostle Paul also wrote to the congregation at Corinth—a community of spirit-empowered people who were much impressed by their own claims of spiritual power. Of the three, wrote Paul, love is the greatest power, greater even than faith by which we are justified, greater even than hope. The suffering love of God is the power of God by which the many who are so often eager to lord their power over the power of others become one with God in Christ.

Two chapters later the apostle returns to the theme of the many become one in God, in the passage introduced by the words, "Then...the end." By now it should be plain that the destruction by Christ of every ruler, every authority, and every power will be accomplished by God's determination to be the God whose way of ruling is Jesus the suffering servant and not Caesar the conquering tyrant. Then...the end. And only then, when all things are subjected to God's way of ruling, only then will the Son who lived and ruled as God's way in the world, only then—as Paul writes—will the Son himself be subjected under God, "so that God may be all in all," "so that God may be everything to everyone." And then: "Then...the end."