

“Transformed by Hope”
1 Corinthians 15:50-58
April 4, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

1 Corinthians 15 is the most extensive treatment of Jesus’ resurrection in the Bible. Its author, the apostle Paul, had encountered the resurrected Jesus, and it changed his life forever. The resurrected Jesus continues to have a transforming effect on all who meet him. The British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has written a 750-page book on this single topic of Jesus’ resurrection. He summarizes its importance well.

Christianity, you see, isn’t a set of ideas. It isn’t a path of spirituality. It isn’t a rule of life. It isn’t a political agenda. It *includes*, and indeed gives energy to, all those things: but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either. That’s what 1 Corinthians 15 is all about.

Jesus’ resurrection is significant enough to change people, and even to change the Church. Consider, for example, the simple fact that the first Christians soon changed their day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday, to Sunday, the day of the week on which Jesus was raised. This was done in spite of two very large obstacles to such a change. The first obstacle was the fact that all the early followers of Christ were Jewish, and the Jews took very seriously the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. The second obstacle, familiar to anyone who has been around churches very much, is that Christians don’t like to make even small changes in the way they worship. Can you imagine the pushback we would receive if our church governing board, the Session, announced that we were going to stop meeting on Sundays and begin meeting on Saturdays? Yet that’s what happened in the early church, and it happened because of the resurrection of Jesus.

Can the resurrected Jesus change you? Can he change our world? Loss of hope, cynicism and pessimism are on the rise in our culture, with dire consequences at many levels. Those without hope for the future lose any sense of meaning in the present. But Christians have every reason to be the most hope-filled people in the world. Let’s listen to what Paul says about this at the conclusion of this long chapter on the resurrection of Jesus.

I. Easter and our Future – v. 50-57

Our text opens with a problem. Paul says that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. This kingdom is what we were designed for. It is our home, where all our hopes and dreams are realized. But we are not made of the right stuff to live there. The perishable cannot inherit the imperishable, and our current bodies are certainly perishable. Our problem is that we are made of the stuff of the first Adam, who is referred to in the previous paragraph as “the man of dust” (v. 48). We need to be made of different stuff, and that’s where the last Adam, Jesus, comes in. By his death and resurrection, he has opened the way for a massive, almost unimaginable transformation. That’s where Paul takes us next.

Notice Paul’s next word—“Behold!” He wants us to look at something, and the something he wants us to look at is what he refers to as a mystery. In the Bible, a mystery is something that we can only know through God’s revealing it to us. And what does Paul reveal to us? Because of the resurrection of Jesus, transformation is coming. He speaks of two different transformations, addressing first the one that happens to those who shall not sleep, which is Paul’s euphemism for death. He is answering the question of what happens to those who are alive when Jesus returns. His answer is staggering. **“We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”** (v. 51-52). And what is this change? **“This perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality”** (v. 53). The bodies we need to inherit the kingdom of God are supplied to us by Jesus. And it happens instantaneously. Let’s imagine this for just a moment. If Jesus were to return before the sun sets on this Easter Sunday of 2021, your body would be miraculously transformed from one that is perishable to one that is immortal. If it were to happen while we were in church together, you would look at the person next to you at one moment, blink your eye and see them completely transformed in the next. We sometimes say to people who have done all the hard work of getting healthy—such things as losing weight, eating right and exercising—“You’re a different person.” This would take that statement to a whole different level, as the mortal puts on immortality and the perishable imperishability. I don’t know how God is going to do that, but I know that every single one of you who knows Jesus will be transformed in that way.

What about those who have died before Jesus returns? The same thing happens to them. **“For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed”** (v. 52). Earlier in the chapter, Paul had referred to Jesus as **“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”** (v. 20). That means that Jesus is both a pattern and pledge of our future. Our bodies will become like his immortal body.

Paul calls this a mystery, which is the Bible’s word to describe something that can only be known if God chooses to reveal it to us. Human reason would never dream up such a thing as bodily resurrection and bodily transformation. The history of philosophical thought shows us what human reason comes up with. Paul addressed one of these philosophies at the beginning of this chapter. He

asks the Corinthians, **“How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”** (v. 12). It wasn’t that they believed that Jesus had not been raised from the dead. What they believed was that life after death was only a spiritual existence, with no material component whatsoever. So what they denied was a bodily resurrection, not a life after death. The Corinthians church was largely Gentile, with the result that the Greek philosophical worldview was very significant to them. This worldview, originating mostly with Plato, was about as opposite today’s worldview as it could be. Our worldview is materialist, a worldview that believes only material things are real. There is no soul, no spiritual existence, and no life after death. When the material part of a person dies, there’s nothing left. Other than the brief memories others may have of you, you’re just gone. The Greek philosophy of Plato was just the opposite, believing that only the spiritual was ultimate and would last. Of course, they acknowledged that the current life is a material life, but regarded it as only temporary. The hedonism expressed in verse 32 arises out of this spiritualized philosophy. Their motto, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,” came from the belief that the senses are to be indulged as fully as possible in this life because there are no bodily pleasures in the next. This life is your one opportunity to indulge bodily pleasures, and since the material is temporary and disconnected from the spiritual, there are no ill-effects in the next life from doing so.

Christianity is different from both the spiritualized view of Plato and our modern-day materialism. God has revealed to us that we are both spiritual and material. It is true that this material body will die and rot. But there is still a “you” left. In another place, Paul describes this disembodied spirit as being unclothed (2 Cor. 5:3-4). 1 Corinthians 15 teaches that this unclothed status is temporary, coming to an end at the return of Jesus when the bodies of those who have died before that return will be raised with their new, immortal bodies. During the intermediate state after our death and before our resurrection, Paul uses the metaphor of sleep to describe our bodies (v. 51). Our word “cemetery” comes from a Greek word for a dormitory, a sleeping place. The Bible teaches elsewhere that though the body has a time of sleeping, the soul does not. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord in a far better state.

Paul celebrates these glorious truths about our future with a quote from Isaiah 25. **“Death is swallowed up in victory.”** Then he personifies and taunts death **“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”** When something is swallowed, it is not seen anymore. The resurrection of Jesus is the death of death. We will one day dance on the grave of death. Paul goes on to explain that **“the sting of death is sin”** (v. 56). In pardoning our sin, Jesus has removed the sting of death. Unless Jesus returns first, we will all die. But our death will be nothing more than a transition from one state to a better one. It will be like the birth of a baby.

A baby’s transition from the womb to life on this side of the uterine wall is not without its challenges. The baby leaves its warm, dark, watery environment with

all its needs met by its connection to mom. It feels the cold air, is blinded by the bright lights and responds with an understandably loud wail. And what does the mom do? She holds her baby with tenderness and love, comforting her child in any way she can. The sting of death has been removed for us, to the point that it is nothing more than a transition from a life bounded by the uterine walls of this sin-cursed world to a life of freedom. The resurrection is God holding us through the trauma of death, like the mother of the newborn baby. He says to us, “Everything is going to be okay; scream all you need to, but know that you are loved and wanted, and everything is waiting for you.”

II. Easter and our Present – v. 58

The final verse of the chapter is Paul’s application of this glorious doctrine, and it is unexpected. You might expect him to apply the resurrection something like, “So let’s rejoice in the bright future before you.” What he does instead is to take us back to the present. Everything he has said about the resurrection is like climbing up a high mountain to get a better and more accurate picture of things. The perspective gained from the elevated mountain top will help you see a more complete picture than is possible in the valley. You see things differently from the top of the mountain than from the valley below.

From his high perch of all that we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul tells us first to be steadfast and immovable. These two words are largely synonymous. The word translated *steadfast* has a literal meaning of sedentary or seated. The steadfast person is happy and content with where they are, so they don’t need to be scurrying around in a vain attempt at satisfaction. A steadfast person is settled in her thinking and beliefs. She is well-anchored, or to change the metaphor, she has sunk her roots deep into bedrock material, with the result that the forces on the surface don’t move her. What are some of the forces that tend to shake us? Suffering is one of them, shaking us by making us wonder if God is really for us. The opposite of suffering, success, is another. It tempts us to the pride of thinking that we have earned the good things that have come to us. Feeling stuck in challenging circumstances will often tempt us to take matters into our own hands to deliver ourselves. For example, someone may feel stuck in an unsatisfying marriage or a job that doesn’t pay enough. These are the things that can shake us if we’re not well-anchored.

What is it that anchors us? It is the bedrock truths of the gospel with which Paul began this chapter. He says that it is a matter of first importance to know that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and raised on the third day (v. 3-4). The translation “first importance” is a good one. The idea is that these truths are the foundational principles upon which a life needs to be built. Gospel truth gives stability through the storms of life. In light of the proliferation of all kinds of crazy conspiracy theories that are rampant today, it should also be pointed out that these bedrock truths of the gospel also protect us from being led astray by

arguments that may sound plausible at one level but turn out to be completely untrue.

Then he says that we are to be **“always abounding in the work of the Lord.”** The Greek language has several words available to it for “work.” Interestingly, Paul chose one that means “exhausting physical or mental exertion.” The literal meaning of this Greek word is “beating.” Have you ever concluded a day’s work and felt like you’ve been beaten up? That’s the idea of this word. But then notice that it’s called the “work of the Lord.” We often think of this idea of the work of the Lord as applying to spiritual work done in the church. But this is describing something much broader than that. The work of the Lord is whatever God has called you to. There should be part of that work that is done in the church. But it also describes what God has called you to do outside the church. And specifically, it refers to the particularly hard things of life. The work of the Lord often is simply to endure suffering with faith and patience.

The final application is to remember that **“in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”** Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is meaning in all you do. Even if your primary work now is to endure chemotherapy treatment for your cancer. Even if it is to be awakened at night by a newborn baby to the point that you’re just trying to survive. Even if it is to hang in there in an unsatisfying marriage. All work, if it is what the Lord has called you to, has meaning. It will not be in vain. That is God’s promise to you, the same God by which death has been defeated assures you that this is true.

CONCLUSION:

Throughout the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Sam Gangee has been guarding his friend Frodo. At the end of their journey to Mount Doom, where the ring is to be destroyed, they find themselves in the evil country of Mordor. Hope is burning low, and the task before them seems impossible. As they are falling asleep one night, Sam sees a white star twinkling in the sky.

The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master’s, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo’s side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.

The resurrection is our white star, allowing us to put away all fear, knowing that our Lord has all things under his control no matter how dire things may seem.

Small Group Discussion Questions
1 Corinthians 15:50-58

1. What are some of your favorite Easter traditions?
2. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope in the face of our fears. It was said in the sermon that loss of hope, cynicism and pessimism are on the rise in our culture, with dire consequences at many levels. Can you think of some of the negative consequences of the loss of hope in our culture? As you think about this, remember that loss of hope and loss of meaning in life are very similar.
3. Can you think of some of the negative consequences of the loss of hope in a person's life? In your life?
4. Our bodies will be raised, and they will be immortal and imperishable, like the resurrected body of Jesus. What implications of that truth come to mind?
5. The death of death is one of the significant results of the resurrection of Jesus. The stinger has been removed from death through Jesus, leading to the fact that we no longer need to fear death. What are some of the bad things that can happen if our lives are dominated by a fear of death? What are some of the good things that can happen if we are free of that fear?
6. Because of the resurrection, we can be steadfast and immovable. We are not easily shaken. What are some of the forces that tend to shake us, and how does the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection stabilize us in the face of these destabilizing forces?
7. We are to abound in the work of the Lord. It was pointed out in the sermon that the word for "work" has in mind the kind of work that is exhausting physically or mentally. But note that it is called the work "of the Lord." What are some examples of this kind of work in your life? [It may be something as simple as enduring suffering.] How does it help you to know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain?