



Lesson Eight

HOPE IN THE RESURRECTION

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 15

MAIN IDEA

While physical resurrection is hard for us to imagine, we trust in God who raised Jesus from the dead. As we recognize the reality of God's saving grace and show gratitude through our words and actions, our ongoing transformation in Christ continues.

OPENING PRAYER

*God of new life,
we thank you for saving us from the power of death.
Help us to live as resurrected people,
free from fear,
walking in friendship with those whose lives are threatened.
Help us remember you will stay with us
until the very end
come what may.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

Nearing the end of this long letter, Paul devotes several pages to the centrality of Jesus Christ's resurrection to the Christian faith. He writes as one who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and whose life was transformed as a result.

Paul knows that nothing in the Corinthians' culture had prepared them to accept the reality of Jesus Christ's resurrection. Not all Jews believed there would be a bodily resurrection. Among those who did, the question of whether Jesus himself had been raised from the dead divided Jews who became Christians from the majority of their people. Pagan philosophy, for its part, focused on the immortality of the soul and considered the body to be relatively unimportant.

The idea that Jesus Christ was the first of many people to be resurrected, and that we can look forward to a future age, after death, in which our bodies and souls are reunited, was quite challenging to the church in Corinth. This belief remains challenging today, as Christians wonder about what our resurrection might look like in a future after death, and what the implications of Jesus Christ's resurrection are for our current lives.

Paul exhorts his siblings in faith to do two things. First, hold fast to the truth of Jesus Christ's resurrection, however impossible it might be to understand in rational terms. At the same time, continue to trust in God who raised Jesus, through whom they are being saved.

LESSON

In his discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul warned against emptiness, lifelessness, childishness, of

demonstrations of power amounting to nothing. Now, in reaffirming the "first importance" of the resurrection, he warns that if the resurrection is not true, both his proclamation of the gospel and the Corinthians' faith have been "in vain" (15:14).

Paul's introductory paragraph is full of verbs that reaffirm his Corinthian siblings' connection to him as an apostle, and remind them of the role they play in keeping their faith alive and active: "Now I want you to *understand*, brothers and sisters, the good news that *I proclaimed* to you, which you in turn *received*, in which also you *stand*, through which also you *are being saved*, if you *hold* firmly to the message that *I proclaimed* to you—unless you have come to *believe* in vain" (15:1–2, emphasis added). The stakes are high, and the Corinthians need to recommit. Their salvation is ongoing. They have been saved, they are still being saved (as Paul also stated in 1:18), and they need to behave like people who recognize that reality and thank God for it.

Many Witnesses to the Resurrection

Paul repeats the foundation of Christian faith, which he had taught this congregation a few years earlier. Remember, none of the gospels, nor the book of Acts, had yet been written; they were not available for the Corinthians to consult. Paul is describing in his own words the appearances of the resurrected Jesus Christ both to him and to others who had testified to their own experiences. Paul lists the large number of resurrection witnesses beyond himself. Jesus had appeared to Cephas (Peter) and to "the twelve," then to "more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time," then to James, "then to all the apostles," and finally, to Paul. (Note that Paul does not mention Judas Iscariot by name, but by

mentioning “the twelve,” he may be implying that the resurrected Jesus also appeared to the friend who betrayed him. Or the twelfth person in that group might be Matthias, whom Acts 1:26 says was chosen by lot to succeed Judas.) Paul notes that “most” of these witnesses are still alive. He implies that if the Corinthians don’t believe him when he says God raised Jesus from the dead, they can ask other people.

Paul’s account of his encounter with the resurrected Jesus testifies to God’s grace and to the transformative impact of the encounter on his life. “Last of all, as to one untimely born” (15:8), Jesus appeared to him. Paul was like a child who was not carried to full term but delivered too soon, or (put differently), outside the usual order of things. Paul denigrates his own standing—“the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (15:9)—but not to give the Corinthians license to disregard his teaching. Rather, he is pointing to the marvel of his conversion and the abundance of God’s grace. If God can convert even a persecutor of the church into an apostle, Paul seems to be saying, can you imagine what he might be able to do with you if you remain open to the Spirit? Baptism is not the end of the pilgrim’s journey along Jesus’ way. It’s the gateway to ongoing transformation.

Having read Paul’s words about his encounter with the resurrected Jesus Christ and about his ministry for Jesus’ sake, how do you imagine his relationship with Jesus? What are you curious about?

What About the Women Witnesses?

Why does Paul list Peter and “the twelve” first among witnesses to the resurrection, when all four Gospels state that women—some named, some not—shared the news that Jesus’ body was not where it had been laid to rest? Furthermore, in Matthew and John’s Gospels, the resurrected Jesus appears first to women: to Mary Magdalene “and the other Mary” in Matthew (28:9), and to Mary Magdalene alone in John (20:14). Was Paul perhaps better acquainted with the men who had known Jesus during his earthly life, rather than the women? Did he hear their version of events, in which men figured more prominently? When Paul writes that Jesus appeared to “more than five hundred” people at one time, the Greek text says “brothers.” As is often the case in his writings, however, the presence of “sisters” can be presumed, if only because such a large crowd of disciples would have included women.

Why Paul’s account of resurrection appearances differs slightly from those in some of the Gospels simply isn’t clear. The fact, however, that all the Gospels agree about women’s vital role in sharing the news of the resurrection, gives us confidence that they did play that role and that this fact was considered important.

In this passage, Paul is not making an argument about gender. His point, rather, is to emphasize that the resurrection is not some figment of his imagination, nor an idiosyncratic mystical experience. Jesus’ resurrection is attested by hundreds of witnesses, in whose encounters with the risen Christ Paul asks the Corinthians to continue to trust.

Who gave you the good news of Jesus Christ's resurrection? Have you thanked them and/or thanked God for them? With whom have you shared the good news?

Another Head Scratcher in the Letter

Similarly to Paul's comment about "the angels" in worship (11:10), chapter 15 contains another reference whose meaning must have been clear to both Paul and the Corinthians, as he didn't bother to explicate it, but is opaque to Christians today. Paul writes of "those people . . . who receive baptism on behalf of the dead" (15:29). Here, he's making a point about resurrection and hoping for life beyond death. He's not making an argument about baptism. That may be why he doesn't pause to discuss what may have been a practice by at least some Corinthian Christians, if not their siblings in faith elsewhere. The practice was apparently not widespread, nor enduring, as this is the only scriptural reference to it.

The phrase translated "on behalf of the dead" could also be read, "for the sake of the dead." If Paul means "on behalf of," is he saying that some Christians are baptizing the dead by proxy, as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints does today?¹ If he means, "for the sake of," is he saying that the salvation of baptized Christians and that of their unbaptized ancestors or family members are somehow bound up together? Is he saying that Christians can hope for those ancestors, too, to live again with God? In the absence of further evidence, you and I

can't know what Paul meant or believed about this particular point.

Resurrection of the Body, Really

In his discussion of the resurrection, Paul emphasizes the tendencies for which he has previously rebuked the Corinthians: over-spiritualizing their faith, not taking seriously enough the here-and-now, flesh-and-blood consequences of their actions. This includes letting some church members leave hungry from the Lord's Supper because most importantly (wealthier church members may have reasoned), they have received the bread and wine evoking Jesus' sacrifice.

In their first-century context, the Greek words for "the resurrection of the dead" all but guaranteed a visceral reaction. The words could also be translated as "the rising of the corpses"—a more shocking phrase that might evoke visions of something like zombies. Therefore, Paul explicates the resurrection as much as possible. He makes an analogy to planting: a seed contains all that is necessary for the plant to develop, but in the growth of the plant, the seed both dies and, paradoxically, is transformed. The difference with the resurrection of the body is that raised bodies will live forever: "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable" (15:42).

When and where have you seen new life (metaphorical or actual) flourish in unlikely situations or settings?

1 Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1 Cor 15:29 note.

Moving from Resurrection to Hope

Notably, Paul never makes an argument for resurrection that starts with its logical plausibility. No such argument can be made; resurrection belies the observable experience of all living creatures. Except one, that is. Paul's argument starts with that one: Jesus Christ. As theologian Charles L. Campbell wrote, arguments about resurrection and its consequences for our lives must move "from the particularity of Jesus, who *has* been raised, to theological reflection on resurrection."² Christians move from the testimony of witnesses to the resurrection; to trusting by faith that what these witnesses say is true; to believing in hope that we will be raised also; to living the consequences of this faith and hope for our lives together. If, as theologian Rowan Williams writes, the resurrection means that "When we have done our worst, God remains God—and remains committed to being our God," then we are free to love God and our neighbor in response, because God's love will never abandon us and death will not conquer us.³

The consequences of the resurrection for Paul's life cannot be overstated. If Jesus was not raised, Paul asks, "Why are we [apostles] putting ourselves in danger every hour?" (15:30). Those who travel the Roman empire spreading the gospel are not only vulnerable to imprisonment and martyrdom by the authorities, they are also at risk from the dangers inherent in travel at the time, like shipwrecks, robbery, injury, and illness. Paul has literally staked his life on the truth of his encounter with Jesus. And he reminds his friends that, by their baptism, they have too: "If for this life only we have hoped in

Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19). Sharing and living the counter-cultural truth of the resurrection will not bring them status or other worldly benefits. But knowing the truth and living in its light is of immeasurable value. If God raised Jesus Christ, who endured unimaginable torture, shame, and a slow death on the cross, then Christians can trust that no one who seeks to wield cruel power over them will truly have the last word. And earthly powers that seek to bully or torture people into submission to their ends would do well to remember there is a power greater than theirs, not under their control.

When has it been hard for you to trust in Jesus' victory over death? Was your doubt more in God, other people, or yourself (or all of these in different ways)?

Paul ends his exploration of resurrection by bringing his readers back to the here and now, back to their relationship with each other and with Jesus Christ, a relationship grounded in his resurrection. "Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (15:58). Wherever our theological questions might take us, we can always return to the loving work of the gospel, which God has given us to do together, and in which the risen Jesus Christ abides with us.

² Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 249.

³ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 91.

What does “being saved” mean to you? Do you have a memory of coming to Jesus, of being baptized and/or confirmed, or of making a profession of faith? Have you experienced new life in another way, such as recovering from a serious illness, starting over after the end of a relationship, or embarking on a journey of sobriety?

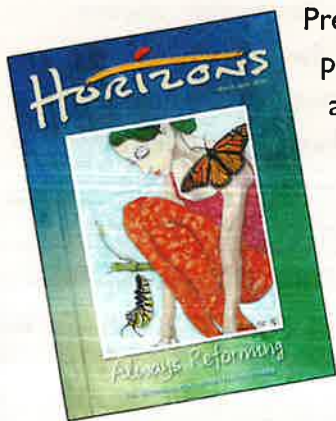
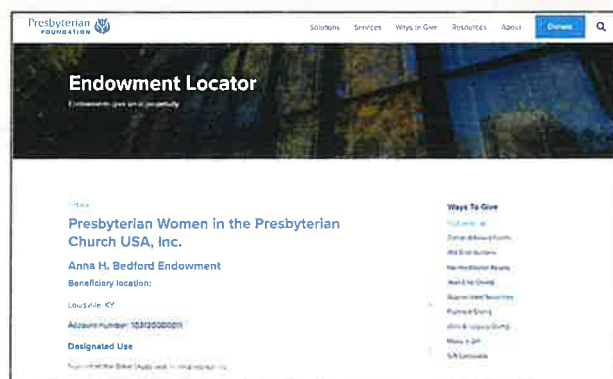
In what ways do you believe salvation is individual and/or personal, and in what ways is salvation a communal endeavor?

TAKEAWAY

Trust in the resurrection is the foundation of Christian faith: trust in Jesus Christ’s resurrection and continued living presence among us, and trust that we will, ourselves, be raised one day. A challenge of our faith is to trust that death has not, and will not, have the final word in God’s creation. A blessing of our faith is that we have each other to help us believe and to live according to this belief.

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