

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 10, 2016

Our Labor Is Not in Vain

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

For a whole chapter, Paul has been making the case, with great rhetorical skill, that the resurrection of the dead is the fundamental conviction of the Christian faith. He has been responding to some in the church at Corinth who were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead. It's not crystal clear how they had reached this conclusion. As best we can tell, they thought that being "spiritual" people meant that they were already participating in heavenly existence to such a degree that the body basically became unwanted and unnecessary, and would finally be destroyed. For these folks, life in the Spirit meant ridding oneself of the body and escaping from it. They viewed the body with contempt. So the idea that it would be raised was an outrage.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul counters this view by saying that the fundamental logic of the Christian message demands belief in the resurrection of the dead. In other words, the good news of God's triumph over sin and death affirms, rather than rejects, the body. It underscores the value and meaningfulness of embodied life. For anyone, especially anyone in the community of God's people, to challenge this foundational conviction calls for a solid and passionate response, which is precisely what Paul lays out near the end of his letter.

He begins by reminding the Corinthians of the common ground shared by all who confess that Jesus is Lord, namely, the objective reality of his death and resurrection. Next, Paul shows the Corinthians how their denial of the resurrection negates the gospel and makes their faith and hope pointless. Then, in the closing section of his argument, Paul shows how resurrection means the transformation of the body. And that's where we find ourselves in this morning's Scripture passage.

Paul starts out by summarizing his argument so far. Since he has been talking at length about some really deep and heavy stuff, he steps back and makes his point in brief. "What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (v. 50). In other words, the body in its present physical expression, subject to decay and death, can't inherit the heavenly existence that God intends for his people. In order for that to happen, the body needs to be transformed, changed. And in the verses that follow, that, says Paul, is precisely what will happen when Christ comes again and those who are in him, both the dead and the living, will be transformed fully into his likeness. That's when God's victory over sin and death will be complete, his people will be fully redeemed, and his mission of a new creation will be finished.

No wonder Paul brings his argument to a resounding climax by using a pair of Bible passages that point toward the fulfillment of God's promises and the triumph of his purposes. First from Isaiah: "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (25:8). Then from Hosea: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (13:14). I like the way that one commentator has rephrased Paul's words: "Take that, death, for when mortality is clothed with immortality, you have lost both your victory and your sting."¹ So Paul is basically dancing on the grave of death. Or think of it this way—If today's text were a sporting event, the referee would probably throw a flag on Paul for unsportsmanlike conduct. The

apostle would be penalized for taunting our greatest opponent, death itself. In the end, however, Paul turns from mocking death to leading a song of praise: "Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 57).

So what more could possibly be said after saying something so triumphant? Well, Paul isn't finished yet. There comes a time when the heavenly praise songs must end and God's people must return to very down-to-earth matters. So Paul closes chapter 15 this way: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58).

Not in vain. That's something Paul has been thinking about and writing about from the beginning to the end of chapter 15. Not in every sentence, but certainly at several points, he has circled back to the assertion that if there is no resurrection, all the faith and work of Christians is futile. Recall how Paul began this section of his letter: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain" (15:1-2).

In vain. Futile. Meaningless. Empty. Those are the kind of words that would describe what it's like to be in a world where life has been swallowed up in defeat. A world where death has the victory and the grave is the final word. But that's not where and how Christians live. Our faith, and all the ways that we put it into action, proclaim that Christ has been raised from the dead, and that we too shall be raised to share in his likeness.

A few years ago, *Rolling Stone* magazine did an interview with actor Johnny Depp. During the conversation, Depp commented on life's meaning and destination. He said:

I went around for years thinking, "Well, what's it all for? All this stuff that I gotta do, interviews and movies and success or not success or this or that. [But when my daughter was born] it was if a veil was lifted, and things became clearer, and I went, "Oh, I get it now! That's what life is for. . . ." I didn't have a real handle on what life is supposed to mean or be or anything like that. And I still don't. And I'm not sure life is supposed to mean anything at all. But as long as you have the opportunity to breathe, breathe. As long as you have the opportunity to make your kid smile and laugh move it forward. . . . I think we're here and that's kind of it. Then it's dirt and worms.²

Thanks be to God, who has raised Christ from the dead, and has shown us that we are destined for more than just dirt and worms. For those who know Christ, our story doesn't end with decomposition, or even recomposition, but with something even more magnificent and lasting, re-creation, resurrection. Johnny Depp is right about the decaying nature of our present bodies, but wrong about what becomes of us. As Paul says, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (vv. 42b-44).

If Christ has not been raised, and thus those who profess faith in him will not be raised either, then what? Well, as Paul says, quoting from Isaiah, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (v. 32b). Or as we might say in more colloquial English, "Party like there's no tomorrow." But taking that approach, and filling our lives with everything that we want but nothing that we really need, turns out to be an empty kind of existence.

During a visit to the television show *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, the usually crass comedian Louis C.K. said some insightful things about our reliance on technology and how, on the down side, it can feed into a sense of emptiness. C.K. said:

You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away, is the ability to just sit there. That's being a person. Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there.

And sometimes when things clear away, you're not watching anything, you're in your car, and you start going, 'Oh no, here it comes. That I'm alone.' It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it . . .³

" . . . that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone." None of us are immune to those circumstances, experiences, and events in our lives that can cause us to wonder if all this is really for nothing. If the world is headed somewhere. If my life is headed somewhere. Is there a point? Is there meaning? Is there purpose? What if all that I am, and all that I'm doing, especially for Christ and the kingdom, is simply in vain? What if it's all ultimately empty and useless?

Take heart in the fact that the apostle Paul, whom we regard as such a bold and confident witness to God's gospel, also struggled with these issues, as did the believers in his churches. They too sometimes wondered if they had wasted their efforts. But Paul keeps coming back to what he says to the Corinthians in today's text, or to what he tells the Philippians in his letter to them: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!" (3:20-4:1).

Because the climax of our story is the triumphant transformation of our mortal bodies into the likeness of Christ, the life that we live here and now in these mortal bodies has worth and meaning, now and for eternity. Nothing that we do, whether toward fellow believers or toward those outside the faith, is small or insignificant. None of it is lost or wasted. It's all gathered up and taken into the reign of God.

Remember that not a single way that you put your faith into action and live out your hope is for naught. Not a single note of a song or a single word of a sermon. Not a single handshake or a single hug. Not a single point made in a Sunday School lesson or a single decision reached in a church business meeting. Not a single dollar placed in the offering plate or a single prayer placed on the altar of God's grace. Not a single call, visit, or card. Not a single gesture of kindness, act of justice, or deed of mercy. Not a single expression of peace, demonstration of forgiveness, or manifestation of compassion. Not a single act of protest or a single word of witness. None of these efforts at promoting the gospel is pointless or purposeless. And all because Christ has been raised from the dead.

Sin has been conquered. Death has been defeated. Life, from God and by God's power, has prevailed. "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 803.

² Brian Hiatt, "An Outlaw Looks at 50." *Rolling Stone* (July 2013).

³ Neetzan Zimmerman, "Louis C.K.'s Explanation of Why He Hates Smartphones Is Sad, Brilliant," *Gawker* (September 20, 2013).