

UNIT THREE: JESUS

SESSION FIFTEEN: JESUS' RESURRECTION AND OURS

Summary of the Fifteenth Session of the Course

The two most important things to know about Jesus' resurrection are: (1) that he lives, and (2) that he promises, "Because I live, you shall live also."

The Corinthian Problem, Very Briefly

Before reading the opening passage from I Corinthians, we discussed briefly its context. Reading between the lines of Paul's letter and of chapter 15 in particular, scholars have suggested the Corinthian Christians believed in Jesus' resurrection but not in anyone else's. They were Greeks, apparently schooled (at least somewhat) in philosophies which led them to reject the idea of resurrection, especially resurrection of the body (in any form). Probably, for them, the body was mortal trash in which an immortal soul was imprisoned. At a person's death, that soul would escape its fleshly prison and be absorbed back into the Over-soul or Universal Soul from which it came. Jesus' resurrection may have been no problem for them, because they saw him as divine, but their own resurrection was something they seemed to have had trouble accepting or even wanting.

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you also 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.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Paul in I Corinthians 15:1-8

Paul first lays down the basic belief that God raised Jesus from death to life, and then goes on to insist upon the resurrection, not only of Jesus himself, but of all who belong to him and put their faith in him. In verse 19, Paul comments, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are

of all people most to be pitied.” He declares that in his resurrection Jesus has become “the first fruits of those who have died,” and concludes, “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

What We Believe About Jesus’ Resurrection

We discussed in eight points our basic beliefs about Jesus’ resurrection. Reading over the lesson and reflecting on it afterwards, I decided to preach about the two most basic of our beliefs about Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, and I have appended the sermon to this summary.

1. **Jesus was truly dead.** That statement may sound obvious, but various people have claimed he was not truly dead and have attempted to turn his resurrection into a mere resuscitation. No, Jesus was absolutely and completely dead. His resurrection is not a resuscitation, nor is it the same as the revival through modern medical emergency procedures of someone who has clinically died.

The Apostles’ Creed says Jesus was “crucified, dead, and buried.” Then, it adds, “He descended into hell,” meaning he went to the place of the dead (in Hebrew, *Sheol*, which is a place of nothingness in which the dead have no life and cannot praise Yahweh). The word “hell” causes problems for us because it conjures up images from Dante’s *Inferno*. The statement does affirm, however, that, whatever it means to be totally and absolutely dead and wherever the dead may go, that is what Jesus was and where he went. He went to the depths of death.

2. **God raised Jesus to new life.** Jesus is still the same person who walked the earth, but after his resurrection he is no longer in the same form or state. He does not simply come back. He is alive with a new quality of life no longer subject to death. The point has been made often that people Jesus’ raised during his ministry died again, but his new life is beyond the power of death.

3. **Jesus suffered, died, and was raised by God to new life for us.** The words “for us” are crucial. There is nothing about the mere “fact” of Jesus’ resurrection which says it is for us, for our benefit. Here, as always, the word (the gospel, the good news) comes together with the event in which we see God at work to tell us what it means for us and our world. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25,26)

The way we interpret “for us” is very important, and the sermon I have appended to this summary will take up that question. We need to identify the “us” for whom Jesus died and was raised.

4. **As the first human truly resurrected, Jesus is “the first-born of God’s new creation.”** His resurrection is not an isolated event but the start of something on-going that will be at

work in our world and will be completed in a new creation. His resurrection promises ours. If we belong to him in faith, we live with hope for our own resurrection. We also live with hope for God's promised new creation. In the 8th chapter of Romans, Paul ties our own resurrection hope together with hope for the entire created order. God will turn the world's death throes into birth pangs. What looks like a world headed toward death, God will turn into a world coming to new birth. Paul writes, "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5)

5. **Resurrection is both a final goal and a present reality.** Faith in Jesus Christ, whom God raised, makes life new for us right now, in this world. We do not need to wait to die before experiencing what Paul calls "the power of his resurrection."

As long as we live in this world, we remain subject to dying, but we are no longer truly subject to death. We will die, but death cannot hold us. Likewise, though our sins have been forgiven, we continue to sin, but sin cannot hold us, either. Since we are given this newness of life now, we are expected to start living it right now: with new attitudes, values, and purposes that come from Christ. We talked quite a bit about this newness we can experience, sometimes to our own surprise, in the course of normal living. We are in process of becoming new people, and sometimes we can feel the newness. At other times, we can still feel very much like the old person bearing the weight of deadness. God, however, does not let go of us and will see us through the times of discouragement. Christians sometimes call this ambiguity in which we live the "already, but not yet" of our new life in Christ. We have the present reality of new life (partially and sometimes ambiguously), and we also have the promise of completion. Paul expresses both sides of our reality in faith in the following two passages.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2;19b, 20)

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were

saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (From
Romans 8:18-25)

6. **We live in the in-between time: the time between Jesus' resurrection and the complete fulfillment of God's love in the new creation and our own resurrection.** The time of final and complete fulfillment theologians call the *Parousia* (Greek for "coming" or "advent") or the Consummation. Christians more popularly refer to it as Christ's Second Coming.

Our sins are forgiven, and we are set free from the dominion of sin, but we still sin. We are set free also from the power of death, but we still die. We are given new ways of thinking and living, but we continue to cling to our old ways. We are a work in progress. Paul tells us, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12b,13) Theologians call this two-fold way of speaking the *indicative* ("you are") and the *imperative* ("therefore, you must"): Christ has set you free; therefore, live in faith's freedom (not under the law's slavery). You are a new creation; so, leave behind your old ways of thinking, speaking, and living. The reality here is that God works with us within our human realm of reality. God works with real people in real ways. There is no magic in faith or even in grace.

Go back to what we said about the Ten Commandments. God could say (in Genesis), "Let there be light," and, "there was light." To create the covenant people, however, God had to work with living human beings free to disobey. So, neither the indicative ("You are my people") nor the imperative ("You must live as my people") could be enough by itself. The Israelites had to become the people God called them to be, because that's who they now were. If that's confusing, think of an adopted child who is old enough to understand the change in her life. She has lived as an orphan, but now a couple has adopted her as their daughter. She is their daughter in fact, but she will need time to become their daughter in her thinking, feelings, and behavior. In this in-between time, we are learning to become the people God's love has made us, the people Jesus calls us to be.

We are not in this process just for our own sake. God still loves the world, and God's love continues to be at work in and for this world. So, our own process of moving from death and deadness to life somehow corresponds to the world's hope for life instead of destruction (or, maybe we should say our hope for the world's salvation).

7. **Jesus' resurrection vindicates him.** He was condemned as a blasphemer and rebel, and his enemies considered him discredited. In his culture, to accept judgment without protest was to acknowledge the validity of that judgment. By raising him from the dead, God vindicated Jesus in all he had done and taught. He was right. God really did want to forgive the sinful, restore the outcast, heal the sick, and love the poor. Jesus taught women about God and God's kingdom ("A curse upon the man who teaches torah to a woman") and welcomed

children as real and worthwhile people. He called upon his own to leave their prejudices behind (the parable of the Good Samaritan), and he taught with an authority the authorities resented and believed they had discredited. Jesus not only taught the truth, he is the truth.

It is most important that we understand that, as the resurrected Christ, Jesus remains the crucified Christ. The church makes a grave error when we try to put Jesus' cross behind him and behind us, too. He is still, resurrected, the friend of sinners and outcasts. He is still the suffering Servant of Yahweh, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. In his new life, Jesus maintains his solidarity with the suffering, rejected, and sinful of the world.

When the church later became imperial, it turned Jesus into the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty, the judge of all people, the ruler of heaven and earth – but no longer the servant who suffered with and for the world's people who suffer. In much of Christian thought, the resurrected and ascended Christ was altogether different from the crucified Christ and completely divorced from Jesus of Nazareth. But, no, that's all wrong. The risen Christ still bears the nail holes of the crucified Jesus, and he remains forever the one who suffered and died for us.

Jesus was right – about God, about people, and about grace. His way has been declared by God to be *the* way. Jesus' vindication is, perhaps, the first and foremost truth of his resurrection. The God-forsaken man on the cross has been made by God the Savior of all the world's God-forsaken people.

8. **Jesus has gone away, but he is not gone from us.** He has returned to God the Father, and we no longer see or hear him. We cannot touch him. We can know he with us only by faith, not by sight. Yet, we have his promise. “And remember,” he says, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20b, the final words in the Gospel of Matthew) “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.” (Jesus in John 14:18,19) “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Jesus in Matthew 18:20).

Why does Apostles' Creed say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body”?

Resurrection is more than just life after death. It is new life given to us by God, starting now in this life here on earth and extending beyond literal death into eternity. Human life is bodily life; we don't know any other kind, any life without a body. We are particular people who live in particular time and space. I am *here*, but I can never be *there*. We live in our bodies, and we are our bodies. The Old Testament makes no distinction between the body and the person.

People's beliefs in life after death take various forms, including many in which the person ceases to be the particular individual and is absorbed in the eternal, into an over-soul or universal

soul which is life or being itself but without the particularity that makes any individual a person. One of the metaphors used is the drop of water that returns to the ocean. Then, the drop is no longer a particular drop but is absorbed into the ocean; it will never be that drop again. Love cannot accept such an arrangement; for love, continuing to live without particularity is not living at all. Love requires the special person who is loved, honored, and valued. That person is irreplaceable. Early in the course, we talked about the question, “Who are you?” I said at that time we cannot understand the resurrection unless we understand the importance of that question. For me to be alive, I must be the person I am, the one God made me, the one God redeemed through Jesus. The personal pronoun “who” must still apply to me and to those I love.

After his resurrection, Jesus is Jesus. His form has changed, but he is still the same person. The nature of the resurrected body is a question we cannot answer (read I Corinthians, chapter 15 and see quotations from it below); Paul calls the resurrected body a “spiritual body,” which does not really answer our questions about its nature. We can only trust God for the bodies we will have. The crucial matter is that we will be the same people, healed and made whole, but not lost in the oblivion of a universal soul.

Resurrection of the body does not require the same molecules to come back together. It is a mystery how God will preserve the person and how that person will be a body but not the same body and yet the same person. It is a mystery, but love will have it no other way, and that is the only answer we have. Our hope does not come from any theory of life after death but from the overwhelming, faithful love of God.

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (I Corinthians 15:35-38)

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is 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 physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. (I Corinthians 15:42-44)

Two more assurances from the New Testament seem helpful. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this; when he [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) “I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.” (II Timothy 1:12) We do not need to know more of what is coming, but only to trust more.

What Resurrection Is Not

1. It is not resuscitation. Those resuscitated die again. Resurrection is new life, now and forever.
2. It is not immortality of the soul. We are 100% mortal, doomed to die. Life is always God's gift to us, not something we have within ourselves. Resurrection is not just the giving back of that gift of life, but its completion. Life is never our possession.
3. Resurrection is not reincarnation. The person resurrected is the same person God loves and will continue to love. We are not replaceable or recyclable to the God who loves us, and we cannot replace ourselves, either, by becoming someone else.

The idea of reincarnation, which in many diluted forms has become popular in our day, is harmful in ways that are not true to Jesus or the Bible. Reincarnation devalues the present life and the person I presently am. It falsely justifies systems of inequality and oppression, caste systems that say people deserve to be treated as untouchables (or women) because they earned their lowly position by their own actions in a previous life. So, the idea of reincarnation excuses us from trying to bring justice to the poor and deprived. Why mess with the divine system of justice? Let people suffer what they deserve to suffer for what they did in their former life.

The goal of reincarnation is oblivion – release from the cycles of life when the soul is at last freed from all bodies and absorbed into the eternal and universal. Love is gone. Identity is gone. The person is lost in the sea of life but has no life of his or her own. Reincarnation is a denial of the worth of existence.

4. Resurrection is not something to be put off until after we die, even though it remains always incomplete in this life. Paul tells us, for right now, “Walk in newness of life.”
5. The promise of resurrection is not just for the individual or for any number of individual people. It is tied to the promise of a new creation. Jesus resurrected is called “the firstborn of God's new creation.” New life for those united with him by faith foretells new life for the entire created order.
6. So, resurrection is no excuse for giving up on this life or this world. Quite the opposite, the promise and the present (though ambiguous) reality of resurrection in our lives compel us to care more, not less, about this world and its people. We must not abandon the world to death and destruction, because God wants it for life and fulfillment.