

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 AM

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Date: 09 June 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, first things first, it's a red-letter day, and we thank God today for the confirmation of Sarah and Christy and Ryan. You three have confirmed that according to God's great mercy, He has caused you to be born again to a living hope. And this new birth promised at your baptism and confirmed today gives you a living hope that changes you forever. Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone, and the new has come. And that's what our passage is about today.

It's about Christian hope and how that living hope will change you forever. Nine years ago, I was changed forever. Nine years ago today, because nine years ago today, I became a father. I remember a few days after the birth of our son waiting in our doctor's office for his first checkup. We were completely overwhelmed and exhausted. There was a newspaper on the coffee table in the waiting room, and it was right around Father's Day, because it was early June.

And the front page story was about fatherhood. And specifically, this article was about what happens neurologically to a man when he becomes a father. And apparently what happens is a lot. The research suggests that the brain of a new father completely changes. Their chemistry is altered, as does their brain activity and function. The article said that new fathers become less aggressive, more sensitive, less competitive, more gentle and compassionate. New fathers' brains transform to make them more nurturing and loving and caring. But interestingly, all of these changes only occurred in new fathers who were in direct contact with their newborns. So for overseas fathers or absent fathers or unknowing fathers, there was no change neurologically at all. You need to see your child, draw close to them, relate to them, to be changed by them. And that new story explained what I was experiencing.

Becoming a father, drawing close to your child, changes you. And in the same way, becoming a child of God, drawing close to your heavenly father, will change you for all eternity. Through Jesus, God becomes our heavenly father. And his Holy Spirit abides in us. And that reality, that relationship changes you, so that you will become more and more like him.

[3 : 0 3] And on the final day, when Christ returns to end this age and begin the next, we shall see him. His kingdom shall come. And all who are in Christ will put on immortality and share in his victory over sin and death. He shall crush the serpent's head, and his kingdom shall never end.

Our passage today is about Christian hope, and about how that future hope changes us. So God's word for us this morning is from 1 Corinthians 15, starting at verse 50. You can open the black or blue Bible in front of you to page 962 and follow along. And as we do, I've broken the passage into two parts. First, verse 50 describes the problem with every kind of worldly hope. And then secondly, verses 51 to 57 articulates the majesty of Christian hope. So worldly hope, and then Christian hope. So first, let's look at worldly hope. Where does our world tell us to place our hope for the future? I think America leads the world in telling us how we should live and what we should hope for in our futures. The American dream has been expounded, exported, and embraced as the best articulation of the hope the world should have. We should hope for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In 2007, I visited Washington, D.C., and I went to the U.S. Capitol building. It was breathtaking, which I wasn't expecting. It's one of the most majestic buildings I've ever seen. It was like going to St. Paul's Cathedral in London or St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The U.S. Capitol building is the great cathedral of democracy, and it's a symbol of hope and the triumph of the American dream.

And when you go into the main rotunda, if you look up at the domed ceiling, you see a fresco painting 180 feet above you that looks like this. It reminds you of what you'd see in a great European church.

And in fact, the guy who painted it was trained in Rome. But if you look closely, you'll notice this is not a Christian vision for future hope. The central man in the clouds, if you zoom in, is not Jesus.

This painting is called The Apotheosis of George Washington. This is not doctored. This is what's there. You can go and look. This painting is called The Apotheosis of George Washington, which literally means George Washington becoming a god. You see George Washington seated in heaven, flanked by two women, Nike, the goddess of victory, and Lady Liberty, who represents freedom. All of this is from the Senate building's website. Completing the circle around Washington are not 12 disciples, but 13 maidens representing the 13 original states of the American Union. That's why they have the little white stars above their heads. And then below Washington in his harem, there are six scenes that represent six industries that together have formed American greatness. Science, commerce, technology, agriculture, maritime mastery, and then right below George Washington, war.

[6 : 41] This fresco was painted in 1865, right at the end of the American Civil War. Washington was long dead. He did not commission this. And it's a monument to where America, and now much of the world, places its hope.

Our worldly hope is in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness through war, science, technology, commerce, agriculture, naval mastery, which will achieve for us liberty and victory, and above all, independence.

We're told to aspire to be our own gods. We should choose for ourselves what is right and wrong, and we should pursue our desires no matter what they are and no matter the cost.

These ideals form the basis of modern worldly hope. There's an obvious problem with all of these worldly hopes, and it's articulated in verse 50. I tell you this, brothers and sisters, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the imperishable inherit the...

Sorry, let's try that again. Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Worldly hope, whatever it may be, places all of our hopes and dreams upon things that perish and pass away. Humans die, and with our deaths die all of our worldly hopes.

[8 : 14] George Washington did not ascend to heaven and become a god. He died. Despite the paintings and monuments and cities and states that are named in his honor, despite his heroic legacy, he is gone. We are dust. To dust we shall return. And when we die, all our worldly hopes die with us.

There's a story I've been told that's probably been conflated to legend of the former rector of our church, a gentle giant, but a powerful preacher known as Harry Robinson.

And the story goes that Harry was asked to lead the funeral of a prominent person in society. And he agreed. And the family asked that Harry read the accolades of this impressive individual at the funeral service, which they printed for him on a full piece of paper.

And so at the funeral service, Harry read the entire list of accolades and achievements this person obtained in their life. And it all sounded very impressive. And then at the end of the list, Harry looked up, paper in hand, and he asked, does anyone know what all this is worth now?

Absolutely nothing. I don't know if it's true. I hope it is. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

[9 : 43] Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. So what about you? Where do you place your hope? Money? Family? A house? A job? Success? Pleasure? Liberty? The pursuit of happiness?

If these worldly hopes are your compass to journey through life, you will ultimately arrive at a dead end. Because all of them are lost the moment we die.

Naked we enter the world, and naked we shall leave it. Craig Gay, now the Reverend Dr. Craig Gay, in his book *The Way of the Modern World*, defines postmodernism as the age of skepticism. Which is another way of saying it's an age of hopelessness, of apathy, of discouragement, and disbelief, and darkness.

So that's worldly hope. A dead end. Perishable. A temporary dream that dies when we do. So what about Christian hope?

[10 : 51] And this is the second part of our passage, beginning at verse 51. Paul writes, Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the last trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Christian hope is a living hope. It's an eternal hope. It's a hope that does not diminish at death. It's a hope that believes one day we shall all be changed.

Christ's followers, those dead and those still alive, in an instant, will be transformed to be like Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ forever.

verse 53, for this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

[11 : 54] When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory? The Christian hope is that on the last day, God's kingdom shall come, and cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

As God promised way back in Genesis 3, our first reading, his enemies will be destroyed, and God's people, mortal, perishable, people like you and me, will put on immortality, and become imperishable.

Life shall conquer death, and death shall die. Our brokenness and mortality will be eclipsed by immortality.

Our bodies will not break, nor will they break down. All disease will be done, and death will die. This is the Christian hope. Unlike worldly hope, it doesn't end death, but it leads us through death, into life with God, forever.

[13 : 06] It's a beautiful picture. Such beautiful words. But surely this is all completely ridiculous. A dear, dear friend once said to me, the Christian faith is a most brilliant lie, because everything it offers you, you do not receive until you die.

You can't prove it. It's a wonderful idea to declare that the dead will be raised imperishable and immortal, and that death will be swallowed up. But surely this is all a baseless hope.

Isn't this just something we tell our children to help them sleep at night? Surely today, we're smarter and more sophisticated than these naive legends and antiquated fairy tales of life after death.

And I would agree if Christianity were based on myths and legends and fairy tales.

But it isn't. Christian hope is a living hope, because it is based on a living person. Christian hope is not based on some unverifiable future aspiration, but on a historic event from the past.

[14 : 26] Christian hope is based on something that happened in human history 2,000 years ago, 11,000 kilometers away on a Sunday morning in a garden in Jerusalem. On a Friday, a man was killed.

Capital punishment. An enemy of the state. This condemned man was buried. And then three days later, his tomb was empty. Most of his followers fled at the first sign of danger, betraying and abandoning Jesus and renouncing any devotion toward him as he was tortured and killed.

They hid in a house and they locked the door. They then left Jerusalem and went home and returned to their normal blue-collar lives as if nothing had happened. And then all of a sudden, these cowards and apostates boldly came out of their hiding, preaching and teaching now that Jesus is risen from the dead, that he is the Lord, God's chosen king, who takes away the sins of the world and offers eternal life through belief in him.

These apostates turned apostles fearlessly declared that they had seen the risen Jesus, listened to him, touched him, embraced him.

They even ate with him. They saw him ascend into heaven and they were all willing to die defending that Jesus was risen.

[15 : 54] stories spread like wildfire of angels at Jesus' empty tomb. An eyewitness accounts from dozens and then hundreds that Jesus, though once dead, was alive.

On Pentecost, 50 days later, Jesus' followers were further empowered by God the Holy Spirit descending from heaven and entering each of them, confirming that Jesus is Lord.

On that day, thousands were converted in Jerusalem after the preaching of Peter regarding Jesus' resurrection and the living hope that is now available through all who believe in him. The promise of God's Holy Spirit was poured out and still is today on all who place their hope in Jesus.

Paul himself, the author of our text, once gave his life to crush Christians and the Christian faith until he himself was confronted personally by the risen Jesus.

And now Paul joyfully, ceaselessly proclaims that in Jesus and him alone, we can all have eternal hope. Our future hope is based upon a past event, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, according to the scriptures.

[17 : 07] Our future hope is also based upon a present reality, experiencing God, the Holy Spirit, alive and at work within us, transforming us into the image of Christ and forming us together to be

his body on earth.

Our future hope is not a baseless fiction. It's not a most perfect lie that's unverifiable before we die. It's based on a historic fact and a present reality.

A man has defeated death. We have the accounts of eyewitnesses, the testimony of human history from then until now that the gospel of Jesus Christ has spread and has taken root everywhere where he's proclaimed and as God the Holy Spirit continues to build his church.

Verse 57 sums up all of this with a word of praise. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Victory over death, our future hope, we inherit through our Lord, Jesus Christ. There's no other way we can be saved.

[18:16] All other hopes end at death. The victory is his and he shares it with us. Our passage ends, and so will I, with an exhortation in verse 58.

Because we have this hope in a hopeless world, my beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

So to our confirm ends and then to the rest of us, here is our charge. Be steadfast. Be immovable. The wicked world will try to shake you, to move you, to displace you, to knock you down with blow after blow of ridicule and persecution.

Be steadfast. Our hope is an everlasting hope. The hopes of the world will die when they do. Be immovable.

[19:31] Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, by giving your life to glorify God and drawing close to him.

We're constantly pressured to bow down to the idols of our age. Be immovable. Build your life on the rock that is Jesus Christ, not on hopes of a dying world.

Let us spur one another on to be steadfast and immovable. Next, he tells us to always be abounding in the work of the Lord. In view of the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Give your life to always abound in the work of the Lord. Not to earn your salvation, but in joyful gratitude that in Christ you are already saved.

And then finally, know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. Unless Jesus returns in the next few decades, everything around us will die and decay.

[20:40] everyone in this room. These walls will come down. These clothes will be thrown out. All of these material things are fleeting, perishable.

And yet, in the Lord, our labor is not in vain. We are working for an eternal hope, an eternal kingdom through an eternal king.

And the labors of today, the work of the Lord you do today, whether as a doctor or a parent or just a friendly parishioner in the coffee hour, this work is not in vain.

The work we do in the Lord and for the Lord is never in vain. Our lives are not lived in vain. Our destiny in Christ is not to rot in the dirt, but to be transformed, to put on immortality, to experience imperishability through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ our Lord.

What a hope we have in Jesus. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.