

PREACHING TODAY

Our Lasting Promise

Focus: Wrong theories about death lead to inadequate theories about living.

In chapter fifteen, Paul answers the question, "How do we understand the reality of death?"

A lot of these words were taken by George Fredrick Handel and incorporated in his great oratorio *Messiah*. We heard some of them sung by the cathedral choir this morning. Let's see how Paul handles death in the fifteenth chapter.

"I would remind you, brothers and sisters, in what terms I preached to you the Gospel, and you received them in which you now stand, by which you are saved, if you hold fast unless you believed empty."

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Jesus Christ died for our sins." On behalf of us he died. He took our place. "He died in behalf of our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." He fulfilled all Old Testament expectations when he died for us. "And that he was buried." Paul wants no nonsense about Christ being a phantom, a sort of spirit who hovered about five inches off the earth.

Last Wednesday night in my final class from the book of John, we spent a great deal of time showing how John also was very concerned to make this point—that Jesus Christ really died. He was not a phantom lord. He didn't just appear to die. He died.

"That he died." Now Paul even adds this to it to make sure we

by Earl Palmer

know. Make no mistake. "That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day." Not raised in the imagination of the disciples. Not raised as a phantom or in a sort of

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spiritual sense, but he concretely conquered death in his flesh the third day.

That's the significance of the third day. That's the historical marker. The third day he was raised in accordance with the Scriptures. In other words, he fulfilled the expectation of Old Testament in the resurrection as well.

"And then he appeared to Cephas"—that's Peter, the leader of the disciples—"and to the

twelve. He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of them who are still alive, though some have fallen asleep; then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Here Paul is referring to his road-to-Damascus experience when he met Jesus Christ alive.

"For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Paul could never get that out of his mind. He had watched Stephen stoned. It scarred him, and he could never forget it.

But now comes one of the greatest sentences in all of Paul's writings. In fact, I have made a joke of the fact that I love to carve inscriptions on wood, and next summer I want to carve this one on wood because I love this sentence from the apostle Paul.

"I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not empty." I love that. "I am what I am by the grace of God." It almost sounds like 1 Corinthians 13, doesn't it? His love is what makes my life work. His love, which was shown in his death on the cross, his victory over death made me what I am. I am what I am by the grace of God.

If each one of us knew what it meant to be a person who lives in the grace of God, by his surprise

gift of love, believe me, it would change your life.

Well, that's how he starts. He starts with the center. He starts with the victory of Christ. Then he decides to talk about death and what it means for us. What happens to me when I die? How do I live now, knowing that one day I will die?

In this, Paul is with all the philosophers who have said, "You can't make sense out of your life until you make sense out of your death." You always have to face up to your death to make sense out of what you're doing when you're alive. Every theme of life is related to this theme that we don't necessarily like to think about—death.

Bad theory leads to bad results

One thing we have to say about this or any other subject in life is, "Bad theory leads to bad results." Confused theology leads to confused hope or even the loss of hope. We know this principle from all of life.

And that's what had happened to the Corinthians. They had a bad concept about death. But bad theory leads to bad results. That's what Paul is going to have to grapple with in this chapter.

Think about it in terms of our own lives. In medicine a misdiagnosis will lead to improper care. That's why diagnosis is such a vital part of medicine, because when you diagnose, you are making a decision at the very beginning of a treatment program as to what is wrong, and everything you do in your treatment is going to be fundamentally built from that diagnosis.

And if you started with a faulty theory in the beginning, believe me, it can have disastrous effects later on in the treatment. We all know that.

Did you know that on December 14, 1799, the father of our country, George Washington, died after a one-day illness?

He went horseback riding. He went out and rode vigorously at

Mount Vernon. He became very sweaty. He didn't dry off, but he walked around outside. It was cold. It was December. He got chilled. Then he went to bed. In the middle of the night he woke up in great distress, and said to his wife, "I'm not well at all. You should call the doctor."

When physicians look back and

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try to figure out what George Washington had, they think he had strep throat. The doctor was the head of the medical school at the University of Virginia, and his personal physician. He diagnosed it as what he called "inflammatory quinsy." His treatment was to bleed the President.

It's all in the records. They bled him. They took a pint of blood first. And they found out after three hours that he was not getting better, so they bled him a second time. Three hours later, they took more blood.

The physician reported, "He seems to be getting weaker." Hah! Three hours later they bled the President again, and then he died.

He had strep throat. We know that it was a misdiagnosed. We know that bleeding is no help for a bacteria. It's probably not a help for much of anything! Yet, that was the treatment.

So a bad theory resulted in a bad treatment. They didn't know

about bacteria. They didn't know that what he needed was an antibiotic. Any drug store today has it, but not in 1799.

We recently saw and grieved for Kobi, Japan, in the recent earthquake. A professor from the University of Washington went there, studied it, and came back and reported on television that what they discovered was what they thought they would find. The buildings in Kobi that were built according to anti-earthquake standards in engineering did very well. But a lot of buildings in Kobi collapsed.

But one surprise was the road system, about which Japan was very proud. Great, long stretches of new super-highway collapsed, fortunately, at five in the morning and not nine in the morning. Many of the railroad bridges and tresses and highways that were, they thought, state of the art, collapsed.

They made a great discovery. There were some faulty premises in the way those super-highways were constructed. And now they don't want that to happen again; they learned from that.

Faulty theories lead to faulty results. Now, Paul takes on three false theories concerning death. These false theories were causing bad results in the Corinthian church.

False theory #1—No resurrection

Look at 1 Corinthians 15:12 and we see Paul take on that false theory. This is the next verse right after he tells about what Christ has done and Christ's victory.

He says, "Now, if Christ is preached to you as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" He's referring to our resurrection, and that's the false theory that is circulating at Corinth. It comes from a Gnostic movement that's beginning to brew. Greek philosophy is, in a sense, invading the early Christian church with some premises that are Platonic rather than biblical.

In 400 B. C., Plato wrote a theory which had a profound effect on Western thought, and not a really good effect either. His theory was that there's a distinction between appearance and reality. It makes so much sense when you hear it at first.

For instance, he would look at those candelabras on this communion table, look at that communion table, look at this floor, look at this building, look at your body and Plato would say, "These things are not the reality. They're only an appearance of reality. The reality is the idea behind them."

Well, that sounds so wonderful until you begin to try to put it into practice. That means that the concrete reality is only apparent. Your body is only apparently real. This pulpit is only apparently real. Life itself is only apparently real. The reality is the spirit that's inside your body. Therefore, your body is really a prison for the spirit.

And so, with that Platonic idea all kinds of bad things began to creep into the Corinthian church. One German scholar has written a whole book called *Gnosticism at Corinth* to show that Paul is grappling with the early stages of gnosticism. This fascination with *gnosis*, with idea, is some special thesis that there is a spiritual reality that's in a prison and the Gospel will help set that spirit free.

Sounds almost like New Age, doesn't it? Well, that's Platonism, old-fashioned Platonism. It has a big effect. As a result of it, Plato and the Greeks never were able to make sense of our sex and sexuality because that's concrete; and they were only interested in the spiritual side. So they either went toward the Stoic side of saying therefore repress your sexuality, or the Epicurean side which said, "just indulge." It doesn't make any difference anyway. It has no meaning. In other words, nothing has meaning that's concrete. The only thing that has meaning is what's spirit, and that's what the Corinthians are being given a dose of.

So, obviously when they heard about the resurrection, *Oh, well, that's not significant. That's silly. The resurrection of the body. The body is too crude for that. God doesn't love your body.* In fact, you can see how they even said, *Christ wasn't really a body; he was more a phantom that was a few inches off the earth through his whole life.*

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sickness or physical
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Paul has to oppose that. He has to oppose it because it's a faulty theory, and it will result in a faulty result. You'll see that in just a few moments. So, he challenges those who say there's no resurrection because that view is sort of a spiritual absorption view, that when I die, my spirit is sort of absorbed in the great tapioca pudding of eternity. That's just a fancy way of talking about my annihilation, because it's saying that the concrete "me" has no value. I'm downgraded in importance.

False theory #2—Resurrection is spiritual, not physical

Now, a secondary form of this teaching we see in Paul's second letter to Timothy where he even names two leaders who are saying that the resurrection has already occurred. You could see that was sort of a cultic thing happening where some people were saying, *Yeah, there's been a resurrection, a spiritual resurrection. We are the ones*

who have done it, and we will help you discover what that could mean to you.

There you see some people teaching that doctrine. Paul opposes that also. As if the resurrection's happened for a few enlightened people with spiritual special gifts, and they'll help you discover it too. He opposes both of those.

False theory #3—Everything physical is insignificant

A third bad theory that Paul opposes is that everything earthly will be burned up, because it's concrete, of no significance. The spirit then will survive; but everything in this earth—like redwood trees, the ocean, places like Seattle—what difference do they make? They'll all be sort of conflagrated and destroyed.

It's not taught in the Bible. The only place where fire is used is in the book of first Peter. But Peter is talking about the travail of new birth, not destruction. This idea that everything is going to be burned up somehow crept into some Christian prophetic movements. And look what a bad effect it has on your life. It means that everything you're doing here and now, it makes no difference anyway, because it's all going to be sized someday. The only thing that matters is just your spirit, and your spirit is all that matters.

So your work, whether you work at Boeing, or Microsoft—who cares about that stuff? Starbucks? Definitely not! What do these things matter? They're all something that the body is taking. Coffee is something the body likes. What difference does it make? It's all downgraded in importance.

Now listen to Paul. I'm going to read you a passage that will change your life because it discusses your death. It almost sounds like poetry. It's so beautiful that Handel put it in the *Messiah*.

The wonderful truth

Verse 51 says, "Lo, 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 trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable."

That's the concrete you. That means, if you've got some sickness or physical problem, believe me, when you are raised, it's going to be resolved! It's going to be fulfilled! *You're* going to be fulfilled!

"And we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. And when the perishable puts on the imperishable, then shall come to pass the saying, (now he quotes the prophets Isaiah and Hosea) 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy victory? O Death, where is thy sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, listen to the last sentence. It's the best of all.

"Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, (hang in there) immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." He used the word *ergo* here, work. It refers to the events that you do, concrete things you do in this world. He's not talking about something in the future, in the sky but the very events with which your life is involved.

Be "abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your—" And now, to make sure

they don't misunderstand him, he used a different word for work. It's here translated by the RSV "labor." The Greek word *kopos* literally means "sweat." "Your sweat is not in vain." It's not empty.

Listen to Paul. He is saying your real selves are beloved. You will be fulfilled. I will be fulfilled. We look forward to that. We look forward to a fulfillment. We don't face the inky abyss when we die. We face Jesus Christ when we die, and our very lives are going to be fulfilled.

Now the apostle Paul enlarges that hope even beyond this passage in a book he wrote after this called Romans. In Romans 8, Paul says, "It's not only true for you that you're going to be fulfilled, but the whole created order is going to be fulfilled." That includes mosquitoes. I don't know how they fit in, but they do. It includes lions and tigers and bears and redwoods and spotted owls; the whole created order is going to be fulfilled; and you're going to play a part in it.

Not one thing that God has made will be wasted. When you're seventy years old, why not take up a saxophone? You can play it on into eternity. Chardin made fun of his friend Huxley, the atheist. Chardin the Christian paleontologist, said, "The trouble with you, Huxley, as an atheist, is when you die you're in a closed box; but when I die, I'm going to carry on my research into eternity."

And that makes you all the more excited to take up a new subject, go to college again when you're 55, 60, 70. Why not? Anything you learn is not lost. You get to carry it on. "Well done, good and faithful servant." You've been faithful in a few things, I'm going to give you more things to do. That's our Lord's one parable about our future hope.

Meaningful life has an eternal perspective

Finally, this means also that everything here and now that I do is profoundly relevant. It's meaningful. When I work for justice, when I work for people who are homeless and try to help them, when I work in trying to make this country more humane, our cities more humane, to get the graffiti out of Seattle and try to make this a joyous place to live, when I play the role of the peacemaker in this world, when I do that, it's not in vain. "Your labor, your sweat is not in vain." And we needed to hear that.

When you handle your death, you can make sense of your life. **PT**



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