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Title: *Embracing Hope*

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:20-57

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I've been teaching weekly in a church context like this almost every week for multiple decades. And I say that just to say when you do something for a long time, you develop a rhythm for how you go about preparing, thinking about it, and in the rhythm becomes, oh, this is going to be an easier week or a harder week or different things like that.

This particular week is actually a fairly hard week in terms of the assignment that I gave myself. And what I mean by that is what I typically will do is I'll work several months ahead and choose passages and themes, and try to say, okay, this is the way that this series should work and be compelling. But when you choose it months ahead and then you get to the week, you sometimes are like, why did I choose this the way that I chose it?

And in this particular instance, we actually chose First Corinthians about a year and a half ago. We worked through the first 14 chapters last year and then I thought in my mind, Chapter 15, it's about the resurrection. It would be great to start that at Easter. We'll finish First Corinthians with this Embracing Hope series.

And here's what made this maybe a difficult assignment. When you take a longer passage, obviously there's more to be engaged in than when it's shorter. So next week we have two verses that are really fairly concise and easy to get your head around it. When there are just a lot of verses, there are a lot of concepts that you're trying to bring together. Then when you have a series of maybe complex ideas or unfamiliar concepts that are part of a passage, maybe things that in some ways seem less talked about and you try to deal with several of those in one talk, it raises the degree of difficulty fairly high.

For example, in this passage we're teaching from verses 20 through 57 today of First Corinthians 15, we deal with imputation, the intermediate state, the rapture of the church, the reign of Jesus Christ, resurrected bodies, death, and the baptism of the dead. And this passage refutes purgatory, soul sleep, annihilationism, and reincarnation. So, are we ready to close in prayer?

Now, you may say, well, you did this to yourself. Why did you do this to yourself? Just change it. You could do a series, do ten weeks on all of this. But the part of what I hope good teaching does week after week is it takes a lot of ideas, and it synthesizes them. And so, in our desire to say we want the texts to shape what we speak about, and this is part of why we work through texts, is because I may not choose just of my own to say the intermediate state. That's important. We need to really talk about that. And so, you're exposed to ideas. But what I try to do is say, how do I take these and bring out the spiritual profit for it?

So last week we talked about this idea of embracing hope because you can look back at the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a clear Easter message. And my idea for this week was to say verses 20 through 57 really deals with looking ahead. A single theme that ties together all these different verses says you can have hope when you look ahead if you know who Jesus Christ is, and if you've trusted him as your savior. Because when you look ahead, if you've trusted Jesus Christ, the future is incredibly bright. And here's what we see in verse 20. It says this, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

There was an article in the New York Times last week. It was in the religion section, the Op-Ed section, and the article interviewed N.T. Wright, who's a New Testament scholar, about one of his books where he argued for the reasonableness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And I certainly don't think that everyone who read The New York Times last week clicked on that article and said, oh, yes, Jesus rose from the dead. But what he was saying was because of the way the language works, because of what's involved in this, it is completely reasonable to believe this. And there's no question that people of that day did not just see this as some kind of a spiritual process, an allusion to some kind of spiritual rebirth, but that there was a literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it has literal ramifications for people today. And that's important as we look back.

But to look ahead, what I'd like to do is say, in essence, that there are two elements to this passage. There's a corporate hope that we see in verses 20 through 34. And then there is an individual hope that we see in verses 35 through 57. And here's the corporate hope. In verses 20 through 34, we read about Jesus being the firstfruits which is an agricultural metaphor, saying that as Jesus rose from the dead, those who are in Christ can say we'll have the same future.

Then verses 21 through 23 is this idea of imputation. It says this, "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him." And this is just a simple statement of saying that Adam sinned, therefore everyone who's born is guilty of sin, and anyone can come to Jesus and because of Jesus' righteousness, be considered righteousness for the future.

Anthony Thiselton wrote a commentary on this, called Solidarity. The same idea is imputation. The biggest passage in the New Testament on this is Romans 5:12 through 21 which goes into some very specific detail. But First Corinthians 15 says this here, too. And here's what Anthony Thiselton says. He says, "Solidarity or imputation was a more difficult concept to explain to a culture of modern Western individualism before the media made sports such an all-pervasive phenomenon in life and before trade unions took over the term to denote one for all and all for one. If a team member scores a goal or counter-wise incurs a penalty, the whole team is credited with the gain or made liable for the loss incurred by an individual on the team. In Romans 5:12 through 21, Paul explains that we cannot have one, the advantage, without the other, the liability. Yet the results of the one trespass differs in effect and scope from the results of the one act of righteousness." And he cites Romans 5:17, "In that how much more to God's grace and gift that came by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many."

And here's why this is important. The corporate hope is that those who are in Jesus Christ come on the heels of the corporate liability, that everybody is guilty of sin, but everyone can have the righteousness of Christ imputed, given to them, and credited to them because of what Jesus Christ has done.

And then what you see is this statement here that really drives at the hope, which is in First Corinthians chapter 15, following in verse 24, it says, "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet."

Now, when it says everything has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself who put everything under Christ. Now all He's saying here is this, and that is the corporate future is where God reigns. Jesus Christ reigns. And if

you've ever had that moment in this world where you say this world feels hopeless, then we need the future hope. If you've said I'm lonely, I'm frustrated at what hasn't happened. I'm disappointed with the way things have worked. The world feels hopelessly unjust. Then you've longed for the Kingdom of God, the way that God will make everything right.

And the problem a lot of times when it comes to this idea of heaven, this idea of the future, is that we often are more impacted by kind of cultural views of this. And here's what I mean. There was an old *Far Side* cartoon where somebody had died and obviously gone to heaven. They're sitting in a cloud. And as they were sitting there experiencing heaven, the little thought bubble in the person's mind was, I wish I had brought a magazine because a lot of times our view of heaven is this idea that it's celestial, eternal choir practice.

And for a lot of us, we think, I don't like singing now with anybody, like I'll sing in my car, but celestial, eternal choir practice doesn't sound that great. I'm not sure I'd like to do that. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Miss Watson was the Christian spinster who was always on the boys. And at one point, Huck describes it this way. He said, "She went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day with a harp and sing forever and ever. So, I didn't think much of it. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that because I wanted him and me to be together."

Sometimes our view of the reign of Jesus Christ is not everything being made right, but it's eternal choir practice. Now there will be worship of the greatness of God, but it will be an inspiring worship. And it is not just something that you look at and you say, this is not going to be moving. And sometimes people say, well, thinking about the next world doesn't really help us in the here and now.

And yet, here's what C.S. Lewis said. He said, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought the most of the next. The apostles themselves who set foot on the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade all left their mark on Earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven, and you'll get Earth thrown in, aim at Earth, and you will get neither."

You see the story of the Bible, the arc of the Bible, the story of Jesus Christ is that God created this world. Jesus has redeemed it. But we live between the redemption that has started and the foothold of the Kingdom of God in little pieces and the realization of the Kingdom of God that is yet future. And the hope that you have, the hope that I have, is in saying that this world doesn't just end, but there is a time when Jesus Christ will redeem, restore, and rebuild this world to what it should be.

And if you and I don't believe that, if we don't have that hope, what happens is we live with frustration because this world is filled with frustration. Things that you do, that you say, should bring lasting satisfaction and it doesn't. Or we fill our lives with escapism simply because we say this world as it is, I need to find something to numb the feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Some of us will do that with a drink. Some of us will do it with Netflix. Some of us will do it with work. We'll do it with sports. We'll do it with all kinds of things to numb the experience. Just to simply say, here is my existence. But when you say the scope of history is moving to the redemption and the glory of God in the future, then you can say what I live in now is not pointless. It's not hopeless. There is a triumph over evil.

In verse 29, we move on to this theme the baptism of the dead. Again, wouldn't have chosen to speak on the baptism of the dead today, but here's what we read. Verse 29, "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour?"

So, baptism of the dead here, corporate hope, is this idea. Anthony Thurston, who I just referenced in his longer commentary on First Corinthians, has 17 options for what this means. Are you ready? Okay. I'm not doing 17 options, although I could. But what he does is he then boils it down and says three are most likely. And then he tells his takeaway from this, and he says it's unlikely, given the scope of all of Scripture that baptize for the dead means that it had any effect. It means that people were trying to identify with others who had passed in saying, we're baptized to show solidarity for their future.

In the New Testament, other than this reference, there's no reason to think that this is the thing. Mormons practice this. By the way, if you've ever paid attention to that, they can baptize somebody after their death by somebody else being baptized in their

place. This is probably where that idea comes from. But biblically, baptism is a choice that somebody makes to say I identify with Christ.

Sometimes parents do it for their family depending on how you see that. But it's not something you do for the dead in this sense. But he's acknowledging it and he's saying, if this has been your practice in the New Testament, in the Corinthian church, he's saying, I want you to understand that whatever hope you have is tied to the fact that there's an actual resurrection.

And then here's what he does next. Verse 30, he says, "And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised." And then he quotes Isaiah 22, he says, "'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame."

And what He does here is he says there's a philosophy that some of you have and your philosophy is to eat, drink, and be merry because there's no resurrection. I might as well get all I can from this life. And I mentioned a few moments ago that the result of no resurrection is frustration or escapism. It's saying in essence, this life doesn't bring satisfaction so I'm frustrated, or it doesn't, so I must escape.

There was an article in *The Federalist* recently, and it said this. This was the title "Too Dead to Live and Too Alive to Die." Gen Z is a generation, the zombie generation. Here's how this article reads, at least part of it. It says, "Does Generation Z take anything seriously?" Generation Z, by the way, is people just kind of in their early twenties and entering adulthood.

"Earnestness is cringe. Being in love makes one a simp and ambition makes one to try hard. There is a deeper ideology lurking in the minds of young millennials and Gen Z, as Esmé Partridge writes. And it's the rejection of idealism in all of its forms. Disenchanted with the world, plagued by hopelessness and nihilism, we have become a generation of zombies, a group of youth that's too dead to live and too alive to die. In the 1920s, famed novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald described this lost generation as one that had grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, and faith

in man shaken. And now, he says, a century later, Generation Z finds themselves in the same space.”

Later in the article, he says, “Even many modern so-called Christians, as Rob Dreher observed, used religion as a psychological adjunct to life, a buffer to the harshness of the materialistic, individualistic lives they actually want to lead. In the context of Zoomers, this makes religion and its secular woke derivatives a supposed stimulant for attaining health and well-being. Since Gen Z now worships the God within, there's been a rise in Gnostic beliefs, self-improvement, wellness, cults, astrology, tarot cards, terror thinking, and of course, LGBT orthodoxy. In our post-religious society, life has been reduced to a biological process that must be optimized for the sake of social approval. Instead of prayer, we use painkillers. Instead of aspiring toward good works that glorify God, we engage in meaningless activities that glorify ourselves. And out of that, reality has emerged the next undead generation, a horde of Gen Z zombies who mindlessly are marching, ready to mobilize, but not to thrive.”

I don't know about you, but when I read that I think I don't know that just describes Generation Z. In fact, in the Bible, what does he say? Here's the philosophy. Eat, drink, and be merry, basically, because we're all going to die. It goes back to Isaiah. It's in First Corinthians. Whether you came of age in the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, the 2000s, or the 2010s, there's a tendency to say this life, if there's no corporate redemption, if there's no scope of history moving forward where evil is triumphed over and God reigns, then this life is frustrating and it's something to escape.

But when there's hope, then this life is something to be embraced and celebrated because it leads somewhere. So, there's corporate hope. Now, there's also individual hope. And this individual hope is in verses 35 through 57. Here's what it says in part. Verse 35, “But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” Verse 42, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. 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.”

In contrast here, imperishable, perishable, this idea of being sown in dishonor, raised in glory, saying that the body, the resurrected body, will be not just something that doesn't decay, but it will have the glory of God. It will have strength. It will be the

spiritual, not meaning, not a body, but something that doesn't have the nature to it. And here's what this is pointing to, and that is, if you've trusted Jesus Christ, there is an individual resurrection, and your body will be raised to life once again.

And if you're young, if you're in your twenties or thirties, you kind of look at older people and you think, yeah, they've got some health issues. You know how older people just like to talk about their health? And when you're young, you're like, I don't want to be that old person who just talks about my health.

And then when you age a little bit, you have a procedure at some point. It'll be surgery but you'll call it a procedure. And you will say, you know, okay, I had this thing happen and then something will go wrong. And what you'll find is that your body, at some point, no matter how healthy you are, how well you take care of it, and how well you eat, may forestall what happens, but sooner or later your body will decay and perish. Decay wins every time. It just does. Gravity wins every time. You can forestall it, but you can't stop it.

But the promise of Scripture is that it isn't the end of the story. That if you're in Jesus Christ, you will have an imperishable body, you will have a glorious body, and the new creation, John Piper said, if we have glorified bodies, the new creation has to have glory to match it. Meaning you and I, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, can face death with a certain hope and a certain expectation of how God will work.

Now, I said this and that is that this passage counters some of these things, and I'm not going to take the time to explain all of these. But the teaching of this resurrected body counters the idea of soul sleep, annihilationism, and reincarnation. And not only that, what we see here is that in time, this natural body, this is verse 44 again, is a spiritual body. Verse 45, and here he returns to this idea of imputation, "So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man."

Do you see the imputation in the picture when you're resurrected, you will bear the image of the resurrected Jesus Christ, the firstfruit of the resurrection from the dead? Now, I mentioned that this passage also talks about the rapture because we're not

done with concepts that aren't familiar or talked about enough or don't take whole books to resolve.

So, here's what we read. Verse 51. "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'"

So, this idea of the rapture is the idea that at one point in the future, when Jesus is returning, that what he will do is He will raise to life those who've died in resurrected bodies. Those who aren't dead at the time will then be caught up with Jesus and will experience His reign here on Earth. Now, here's where this idea of the intermediate state comes from. And again, this is something that you maybe never thought about, but in the Bible, the idea is basically this, when you die you immediately either experience paradise or torment.

Jesus on the cross, says to the thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 16, the people who died before the resurrection were experiencing torment. But it's pre-resurrected bodies. So in some sense, there's this intermediate state that exists, but it's not a hopeless state. It's paradise. It's that. But it's not ultimate. And the ultimate will be when the new heavens and the new earth are created, and the resurrected followers of Jesus Christ exist in perfect community before the final eternal state.

And this is when He says, this is when you'll say, death, where is your sting? Where is your victory? In fact, that's what this text culminates with. It says, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" And the phrase "sting" here is a word for a venomous snake biting somebody. And he says, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." It says death is not the last enemy because it will be defeated. And individually you can have hope if you have believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You know, death is a reality that all of us will face. And when you think about death, what you realize is that there is a sense if it's your death, you can say if the resurrected

body, if the eternal state, the intermediate state, if all of these things are glorious, then I don't have to fear death.

It doesn't mean you won't grieve when somebody you love dies. In Acts 8:2 when Stephen was martyred, the people gathered, the followers of Jesus and they mourned. And First Thessalonians chapter four, we're told that we grieve, but we don't grieve like those who have no hope when somebody dies because there is hope. And Job, when he lost his children, worshiped in Job one. So, there's grief and hope when it's somebody else who's a follower of Jesus.

And there's no hope in the Scriptures in Romans nine when somebody dies who has not put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. And the reality here, First Corinthians 15, it says, "The sting of death is sin." Remember the imputation, all are guilty because of Adam. And he says this, "And the power of sin is law." The law tells us that we're under guilt not just because of Adam, although that's true, but also what we've actually done. But thanks be to God, because Jesus has been the heavenly man and invites each of us to this future, you can run to the cross of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and say, I can look ahead to corporate hope and to individual hope.

Now, the challenge, one author points out, is that we live a lot of times with eternity amnesia, meaning what we do is we get in the throw of our life, and it just seems like the next thing is the next thing. And we just get on a treadmill of activity, a treadmill of life, and we don't have this hope. And that's when we find ourselves frustrated. That's when we find ourselves escaping because we're simply then saying, I just need to get through this cycle rather than living with this fixed reality about what Jesus Christ is.

And some of us, maybe even more insidious, will ignore reality altogether. We'll fool ourselves into thinking that what we build in this life is significantly eternal. I don't mean that what we build here doesn't matter, because what we build here has eternal ramifications. But what I mean is this, and that is it's easy sometimes to see this world as being the ultimate endpoint. And even if you're successful at building a long, secure, happy life, your life will still at some point come to an end and your life will be deemed ultimately something that is either in this resurrected camp of the second Adam of Jesus Christ, pointing to eternity to this hope or not.

I don't know if you've ever been to the beach and watched some kids work on a sandcastle, but sometimes kids will build sandcastles and they'll go nuts. Sometimes

adults will do it, too. They'll build these elaborate sandcastles and it's a fun beach activity for a half day, a day to build sandcastles and just say, this is great. But do you know what happens to sandcastles sooner or later? They get washed away. Even if you go far up on shore and you say, we're far from where the waves will crash.

If somebody built the perfect sandcastle, they brought their sleeping bag out, they slept in their sandcastle, they made it their home, and they just went all in on the sandcastle. What would you say to that person? You'd say, don't you know the waves are coming sooner or later and that thing will wash away? And what eternal hope does, living without eternity amnesia does, is it reminds us of what will be washed away and what will last.

And today, wherever you are, whether you come here as a person who reads these verses and says, yes, this is my hope, or you come here and say, maybe I wish that were true, but I don't know. What I hope you hear is that real hope is not found in simply making this world better, your life better. But in looking back at what Jesus Christ did on the cross and His resurrection, and looking ahead to what will be true, which is the reign of Jesus Christ, the rule of God, a corporate hope and a personal hope that says death doesn't have power over me. I will have a resurrected body in the new creation if I'm a follower of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. God, I ask today that you would help each of us here to be able to see death from your perspective, to be able to see this world from your perspective, and in that to live with hope and to live with purpose. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.