



Death, the Last Enemy

The Power of God's Love

About the Story

We continue with Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul had preached in Corinth and planted house churches, developing small communities of believers who met to pray, to care for each other, and to share meals in their homes. Corinth was a highly diverse city, Greek in origin, and now controlled by the Roman Empire. Much of the new church was Gentile, meaning they had little experience with Jewish beliefs. They had many questions about Paul's teachings, and wrote to him on at least two occasions to ask about proper practices in life, worship, and belief. In our text today, Paul addressed concerns in the community about the resurrection.

The Point:

We can rejoice since the risen Christ will destroy death forever. God's love is expressed no more powerfully than in the act of conquering death. We all need to be reminded that if death cannot keep us from God, nothing can.

Paul began by calling on common authority to ground his argument for hope. He reminded his audience of Jesus' death and resurrection "in accordance with the scriptures" and Jesus' appearance to many believers. Paul reminded them also of his own unworthiness, because he persecuted the church (see Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-9).

Paul then insisted, unequivocally, on the truth of the resurrection. But what did that mean? The nature of the afterlife was a subject of extensive debate in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman religious life. Was there life after death? What did it look like? These questions were up for debate in the community.

These many debates meant new Christian churches, made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers, had an incredible mix of ideas about the afterlife! Paul spoke from his Jewish background to promise a coming resurrection, initiated first in Jesus' rising. Paul argued passionately for the believers to trust that all will be raised from the dead. To those in mourning, Paul promised that death does not have the last word. Jesus, raised from the dead, has victory over its destructive power. Even though we die, we share in Christ's victory over death. Those who had died were (as Paul writes) "asleep," soon to be woken in the resurrection.

This coming resurrection was not only for the dead. It would be a transformation for the whole world. This new world, God's kingdom, would be an entirely new kind of life for everyone, with new and spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15:42-52) and a new beginning for the whole world. Paul took up the mantle of a long line of prophets that promised a catastrophic event followed by radical transformation (see lesson #2-26 on Mark 13:1-18). "Then comes the end," Paul said, and the fulfillment of the kingdom that Jesus preached and promised throughout his ministry (see Lessons #2-16 and #2-22).

Paul promises the Corinthian church—and us—that death is not the end; instead, Jesus is the end of death!

Last Week/ Next Week

Last week Paul wrote of the centrality of love to a community experiencing conflict. Then he offered a list of the attributes by which they would recognize love. In today's lesson, we learn about the power over death of Christ's resurrection. Next week is the final reading in this year's lectionary. The end is shown to be a beginning, in which the Holy Spirit comes to the community of believers.

Opening Prayer

God of promise, your Son Jesus died and rose again that all may have eternal life. When we are in mourning, bring healing, when we are in despair, bring hope. Help us live in the promise of resurrection, sharing joy, hope, and love with those in need. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Into the Story

For as much as today's reading, and many others, talk about the resurrection, the Bible says very little about what the resurrection and eternal life will actually be like. In popular culture, heaven is often depicted as a place full of clouds, with a pearly gate, and everyone playing harps or lyres. When you think of heaven, what images come to your mind? What have you been taught about heaven and the afterlife? What do you hope it will be like? Go around the room and share your thoughts.

Learning the Story

Paul defends the resurrection of Jesus. He reminds the Corinthians about those who saw the resurrected Jesus. Paul ends with the good news that death is not final. The final word is our victory over death through Jesus.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 – The Resurrection of Christ

- ❓ What do you remember about the Corinthian church from past lessons?
- ❓ Paul summarizes key points of what has been proclaimed about Christ. What would you add to his list?
- ❓ Retell the story of Paul's conversion. How did Jesus appear to him and stop his persecution of the church? Feel free to look it up in Acts 9 to help remember!
- ❓ When have you felt like “the least” of a group and yet recognized that you were contributing in a crucial way?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 – The Resurrection of the Dead

- ❓ How many ifs does Paul use in this passage?
- ❓ Why do you think Paul argued that Christ has to be raised in order for our sins to be forgiven? How does Jesus' resurrection connect to our sins?
- ❓ Why do you think the Corinthians were arguing about the resurrection of the dead?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26 – The Last Enemy to be Destroyed

- ❓ What do you imagine it will look like to be “made alive” in Christ?
- ❓ Why do you think all rulers, authorities, and powers must be destroyed?
- ❓ How do you think the world will change when death is destroyed?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 – Death Has Been Swallowed Up

- ❓ What is the mystery that Paul refers to?
- ❓ Paul uses flowery language about trumpets and twinkling eyes. What do you make of these images? Do you think they are literal or metaphors? What other images can you think of that describes the resurrection?

Bible Connections

In verses 3-4, Paul says “in accordance with the scriptures.” These are a few of the verses he may be referencing:

- ✚ The psalmist prays for deliverance from persecution (Psalm 69:1-9).
- ✚ The suffering servant bears our infirmities (Isaiah 53:1-12).
- ✚ The prophet calls for Israel to repent (Hosea 6:1-3).

Living the Story: Fellowship

Next week is Pentecost, and it is the last week of Small Group lessons! To celebrate, throw a party! Spend this week planning—who can bring what snacks or beverages to the party? Do you want to have a theme to plan your snacks around (for example, since it is Pentecost, you could do dishes that involve oranges, yellows, and reds to celebrate the fire of the Holy Spirit)? Don’t forget to assign someone to bring plates, napkins, cups, etc.!

Bible Nuts & Bolts: The New Beginning

A few books of the Bible are apocalypses. An apocalypse is a religious text that focuses on revealing secrets about the heavenly order and the end of the world. Apocalypses are written for a community facing persecution. The persecution is described as being part of God’s ultimate plan. Believers are called to remain faithful. At the center is a message of hope for the oppressed community: God will provide an end to suffering and will dwell with the faithful forever.

Paul’s letters are not apocalypses but include some things in common. The early church faced persecution from Roman forces and Jewish religious leaders. Paul’s description of the new creation shows the central hope that believers will be made into a new creation and the entire world will be made new in Christ.

Closing Prayer

For your closing prayer today, turn to another letter of Paul, Philippians 2:6-11. Begin the prayer with the following, “God of love, we celebrate your Son, Jesus...” then continue with verse 6 all the way through verse 11. When you have finished, say “Amen!”

At Home

- ✚ Start a journal where you can write any thoughts, reflections, and prayers that come to mind as you journey through the class this year. Perhaps your first entry can be taking a moment to journal your intentions and hopes for this class.

- ✚ One of the key relationships in today's story is the relationship between humanity and the Earth. Think of small ways to care for the Earth this week, such as recycling, volunteering to pick up trash at a local park, or switching to reusable shopping bags.
- ✚ Read the daily readings this week to get in the habit of spending a little bit of time each day meditating on scripture.

Daily Readings

Sunday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

Jesus saves! Believing that he conquered death both redeems and transforms. How does Jesus' death and resurrection transform your life?

Monday – Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-9

Tithing is an act of service. Donate some canned items or gently used clothes to a local charity.

Tuesday – Read 1 Corinthians 16:10-14

Do everything in love. Send a card to someone in need.

Wednesday – Read 1 Corinthians 16:15-24

Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthian church. Write a letter to a loved one building them up in Christ.

Thursday – Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

We find strength and comfort through Christ. Who is someone that has helped you through a difficult time? Say a prayer of thanksgiving for their example.

Friday – Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-14

As Jesus extended grace towards us, we must follow his example and extend grace towards others and build each other up. Pray for someone you know going through a tough time.

Saturday – Read Acts 2:1-4

The Holy Spirit moves us and guides us. Say a prayer of invocation asking the Holy Spirit to transform your life!