

Session 7

THE IMAGE OF HOPE

1 Corinthians 15:44b-58

Memory Verse

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

– 1 CORINTHIANS 5:56-57, CSB



The Image of Hope

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Christians are increasingly transformed into Christ's image, beginning at salvation and concluding at the second coming.

“Results may vary.” That is the disclaimer written in microscopic font that accompanies so many self-improvement products, campaigns, and workshops. That little disclaimer is usually strategically placed somewhere in the corner of the screen, underneath photos of the person who had miraculous results with whichever product is being advertised. The photos are usually the standard “Before/After” images that testify to the person’s hapless state before encountering the product and the rejuvenated transformation that has come to pass. The nature of the product is not particularly important. The format of such promises has become so commonplace that examples readily come to mind, ranging from weight loss, financial breakthroughs, and medical advancement to teaching infants to read and sealing holes the size of a door in the bottom of a boat.

Wouldn’t it be great if results didn’t vary? What if everyone was guaranteed the exact same transformation? What if the life-changing results of the “after” picture were not remotely dependent on the effort of the user? Yet this is exactly the hope that Jesus offers to all who follow Him. There is a transformation for every Christian that is nothing short of heavenly. No asterisks needed.



Describe a time when you were disappointed in the results of a self-improvement effort. How did that influence the next time someone offered you a similar opportunity?

? If you could change anything about your life with (or understanding of) God, what would it be? Who have you shared that with so they can join you in praying to that end?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to dispel their acquired faulty belief that the resurrection wouldn't happen. In assuring them of the reality of the resurrection, Paul described the manner in which their nature would change as believers in Christ, ultimately leading to their glorification at His second coming. Paul tied the joy of that assured hope to the continued work of the gospel through the Corinthian Christians.

1. Image Overhaul (1 Cor. 15:44b-49)

The latter half of 1 Corinthians 15:44 began, in summary form, an application of Paul's previous argument regarding the resurrection from the dead. Specifically, a group of Corinthian Christians had fallen prey to a false teaching that asserted that there was no resurrection from the dead. This would not have been a new idea for Paul to confront, as it was also a belief of the Sadducees. In the preceding verses, Paul had used agricultural metaphors to demonstrate the transformation that occurs in transitioning from one's physical body to a spiritual body. Having done so, Paul summarily stated, "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."

This statement signaled a return to what Paul had written earlier in verses 21-22 regarding the redemptive link between Adam and Jesus. Death had come through Adam, the first man, and resurrection from the dead through Jesus, the second man. In resuming the topic, Paul referred to Genesis 2:7, which spoke of Adam's creation, having the breath of life breathed into him and, thereby, becoming a living being. Once again, the designation of Adam as "the first man" in contrast to "the last Adam" created redemptive tension between Adam and Jesus. Adam was created to be a living being, who ultimately ushered death into the world through his fateful decision in Eden. The last Adam, Jesus, was the life-giving spirit. Mark Taylor comments, "In other words, just as the natural body came to all humans through Adam so also Christ became in resurrection a life-giving spirit (pneuma), that is, the source of life to all who are 'in Him.' The first Adam received life. The last Adam imparts life."¹

? What differences would you highlight about being in “the image of the man of dust” versus the “image of the man of heaven”?

? Application: How have you experienced the reality of living in the image of Adam, the man of dust? If you are a Christian, how have you experienced living in the image of the man of heaven? If you are not a Christian, how might God be calling you to respond today?

Verse 47 saw Paul switch from the Adam/last Adam comparison to the terminology of first man/second man or man of dust/man of heaven. “Man of dust” held the Genesis 2:7 text firmly in the background, as it referred to Adam’s creation from the dust. The phrases of dust and of heaven referred to the origin and character of the two representative heads. It was simply another way for Paul to distinguish the natural and spiritual man. According to Taylor, Paul was pointing out that “each bears the image of their respective representative head. . . . Humans continue to bear the image of God (Gen. 9:6), even if altered by Adam’s fall. The image of God ‘does not need to be regained, but to be perfectly restored/renewed.’”² In this incredibly challenging passage, the heart of Paul’s argument was that restoration came through Jesus Christ when He was resurrected and, therefore, those who follow Him will be made like Him in their own resurrection. Those in Christ will be restored to the perfect image of God, not the marred image that has been altered by sin.

2. Eternally Changed! (1 Cor. 15:50-57)

Almost as though he sensed the difficulty of the previous section, Paul turned to clarify the necessity of transformation. Gordon Fee notes, “Paul’s point is that which he has been making since verse 37, that ‘the body that shall be’ is a transformed expression of the one that was ‘sown.’ He now spells that out in terms of its present incompatibility

with the future.”³ Unless transformation took place, no one could ever inherit eternal life because the flawed and natural were starkly incompatible with the holy and spiritual. According to Taylor, “The kingdom of God in 15:50 is future, when those who belong to Christ will be raised and the Son hands the kingdom over to the Father.”⁴

The matter of inheritance echoed the Old Testament promise of God’s people inheriting the land of Canaan. While that was certainly not without its tragedies and difficulties, it was possible because it was a physical people inhabiting a physical land in fallen physical creation. However, the Old Testament passages were a shadow of the greater inheritance that was made available through Christ. This greater inheritance was not possible for the physical, decaying, temporal bodies that Christians inhabit. It demanded a restored and renewed body that was fit for the glorious and eternal perfection the life Christ offered.

In light of that, Paul continued with an abrupt call for attention: “Listen!” He recaptured the attention of the Corinthians with the declaration of a mystery. The mystery dealt with bearing the likeness of the man of heaven. Not every Christian has to die physically; after all, at Christ’s return, some will be alive. However, every believer must be changed in order to “bear the likeness of the man of heaven,” says Fee.⁵ Paul continued to explain that the transformation would be instantaneous by using two phrases used nowhere else in the New Testament or the Septuagint: “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” Paul’s description of trumpet blasts served to heighten the connection between the instantaneous transformation and the return of Jesus.

? How does Paul’s teaching of the insufficiency of the human body for the glories of heaven contrast with the earthly views of the human body in our culture? Provide some examples.

? Application: What impact does it have on you to read of Paul speaking so concretely of the return of Christ? What images does it bring to your mind?

Paul's gradual and methodical crescendo finally reached its climax in verses 54-57. As if holding up "Before/After" photos, contrasting the wretched decay of the man of dust and the glorified majesty of the man of heaven, Paul had repeatedly emphasized the holy demand for transformation of the believer if he or she is to inherit the kingdom of God. Now, Paul pushed beyond the demand to the future benefit. When the future transformation has instantaneously taken place, death will have been swallowed up in victory! "The saying that is written" referred to passages Paul used from Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14. Fee says these were "the only instance of his citing yet unfulfilled prophecy; but as always he cites the [Old Testament] in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. So these two passages are in fact fulfilled in Christ; they simply have yet to be realized."⁶ The transformation that awaited would complete the Christian's victory through Christ over sin and death!

3. The Future's Impact on the Present (1 Cor. 15:58)

At the conclusion of an elongated section, which had included stern rebuke from time to time, Paul drew his readers back with the affectionate greeting "my dear brothers and sisters." This was no small matter for a correspondence with the Corinthians. They were Paul's most difficult congregation, battling him on multiple points of doctrine, questioning the validity of his apostleship, and glorying in their own persistent (and vile) sinfulness in many regards. Nevertheless, the great apostle reminded them of his sincere love for them. In doing so, Paul moved to the immediate application of his teaching on resurrection.

Because the Corinthians had become beset by a group who supported the belief in no bodily resurrection, they had evidently begun to question the point of continuing to persevere in the faith. Paul sought to correct that using a positive/negative approach that was common to his writings. The negative was a combination of two words, steadfast and immovable. The two words together communicated the idea "let nothing move you." There was great urgency in these two idiomatic words due to the threat being posed to the doctrine of the resurrection. The positive, then, was that the Corinthians were to be "always excelling in the Lord's work." With no specific activity in mind, Paul pointed the Corinthians generally to do all things with excellence, whether in contact with Christians or outsiders, in such a way that glorified Christ.

? What are some reasons that the same resilience and fortitude Paul referred to are needed by Christians today? What methods for refusing to be moved have you found most beneficial?

? Application: When you think of doing all things for the glory of Christ, what sort of activities immediately jump to mind? What would you say is the best way to determine if you are doing something at a level that glorifies Christ?

Finally, Paul concluded this long chapter by reassuring the Corinthians that they knew that their labor in the Lord was not in vain. Interestingly, Paul opened chapter 15 by wondering if his own work with the Corinthians was in vain, due to the temptation among them to depart from the faith and their questioning of the reality of the resurrection. At the conclusion, however, Paul shifted from pondering his own ministry's vanity to assuring the Corinthians that their ministry was definitely not in vain. Fee notes, "Christ has been raised from the dead, and they too shall be raised to share His likeness; therefore they may not only abound in his service, but know assuredly that what they do is not in vain."⁷

Conclusion

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians dealt squarely with the temptation to disbelieve the bodily resurrection from the dead. As he unpacked the case for the resurrection, Paul offered important insights for the Christian.

First, only Jesus can restore what sin destroyed. The hope of bearing the image of Christ is that doing so requires redemption. There is nothing a person can produce, do, buy, give, say, or promise that would be sufficient enough to earn bearing Christ's image. That is because bearing His image means becoming like

Him. Scripture demonstrates repeatedly that, despite best efforts, humanity is hopelessly incapable of doing that in its own strength and capacity. Only Jesus can restore and renew the fallen. Only Jesus saves. All other attempts are, at best, futile; at worst, idolatry. Jesus is the only source of eternal hope.

Second, transformation is already happening in the life of the Christian. Transformation begins at the moment a person accepts Christ as Savior. It is a gradual work of the Holy Spirit that is commonly called sanctification. In the life of a Christian, the Holy Spirit prompts and convicts the Christian to be increasingly conformed into Christ's likeness. Among the myriad applications, this can include the way a Christian treats others, resolves conflict, seeks to live righteously, shares Christ through gospel conversations with others, and seeks to know his or her Savior more intimately. Transformation is already underway for the one who calls Christ "Savior."

Third, transformation will never be complete on this side of eternity. While it is already underway for the Christian, the process of transformation will never be completed until the final transformation at the return of Christ. This is evident, most obviously, by the ongoing decaying of physical creation—including one's own body. The bodies inhabited in the world are not nearly glorious enough for the grandeur that awaits in heaven. There is a great transformation coming, and it will be indescribably beautiful.

Fourth, what a person believes about the resurrection and life with Christ afterward impacts the manner in which living for Christ and the work of the gospel in this world is viewed. Paul connected these ideas frequently. Because Christ is the Christian's assured hope and the One who provides ultimate victory over sin and death, living in a world that does not know Him and seeks to deny Him challenges the believer to steadfastly share Christ through gospel conversations, encounters, work ethic, and any other outlet through which he or she can give glory to Jesus. What is more, because Christ was resurrected, the Christian is assured of his or her own resurrection. That assurance is the source of the hope that the Christian shares with others.

? Why is it important to foundationally believe that Jesus is the only one who can restore creation from the destruction of sin? What other ways might the world suggest as viable options? What results have you noticed coming about from those options?

? How would you describe your current state of transformation? What is God challenging you with as a next step of following Him in faithfulness? Are you in a season of growth, or do you feel like you are in a desert season right now?

? What impact does studying the resurrection have on your desire to share that with others? Who do you know who desperately needs the hope of a guaranteed transformation of such a heavenly magnitude?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Christ is the second Adam in whose image Christians are transformed.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Realizing that every Christian is changed into Christ's likeness, there is resolve and steadfastness in the ministry of the Christian to reach the world for Christ.



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Joy of Making Disciples

Main Passages

- 2 Timothy 1:1-7

Session Outline

1. Of, In, and From Christ (2 Tim. 1:1-2)
2. Paul's Affection for Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3-5)
3. An Exhortation to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6-7)

Memorize

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

- 1 Corinthians 15:56-57, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - 1 Corinthians 15:47-58
- Tuesday - 1 Peter 1:3-5
- Wednesday - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14
- Thursday - Hebrews 6:17-20
- Friday - Romans 6:5
- Saturday - John 11:25-26

References

¹Taylor, Mark. 1 Corinthians. NAC. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014.

²Ibid.

³Fee, Gordon D. The First Epistle to the Corinthians. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987.

⁴Taylor.

⁵Fee.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.