

A Living, Daring Faith

The Interaction Between our Faith and the History we have in Christ

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Introduction

When you express hope for something, what is the basis for that hope? Is it simply an expressed wish, or does your hope have a foundation? The other option is that your hope runs contrary to your present situation.

You have an outdoor activity planned and you look out the window in the morning and say, “I hope it doesn’t rain today.” What is your hope based on? Is it simply wishful thinking with no foundational knowledge or insight? Did you look at a forecast beforehand and discovered there is a 50% chance of rain? Are you hoping that you are in the 50% that doesn’t experience rain? Have you looked at the forecast and saw that rain is a virtual certainty? Then, your hope is contrary to all of the available evidence.

There is a difference between these examples of hope. As Christians, we say that we have hope in Christ. But what is the nature of that hope. Is it simple wishful thinking? Or does it have a foundation? The apostle Paul believes that we have a hope in Christ for our future because of our history in Christ and his death and resurrection. He explains this clearly in 1st Corinthians 15. Let’s look at that text and examine the hope that we have in Christ.

The Text Itself

1 Corinthians 15:1-14

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Tracing Paul's Thought

Let's trace Paul's thought through this passage. He has addressed a lot of issues throughout this first letter to the Corinthians, but this is his final stroke. This is what he wants to leave them with. This is what is of "first importance." This is the gospel itself. Let's read those verses again.

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

Let's stop there for a minute. A stunning percentage of professing Christians cannot clearly articulate the gospel. Well, here is your starting point. And notice that this gospel does not start with you as an individual. It starts with Jesus and proceeds through you as an individual on its way to affecting the entirety of creation. That is where Paul is heading with this gospel.

It is also important to look at the verbs Paul uses when recounting the gospel. Christ died and was buried. These two verbs "died" and "buried" are in the Greek aorist tense and being used like our past tense. Jesus died once in the past and was buried once in the past.

The verb "was raised" is a little bit different. We do not have a really good way to emphasize the difference in English. It is in the Greek perfect tense. This tense is most often used when you want to describe an event that happened in the past but the significance of that act continues into the present. Jesus was resurrected once in history, but that event has continuing significance in the present. This little point of grammar will have consequences when we look at the implications of the passage.

This little passage forms the central core of the Christian message. Christ died in accordance with Scripture. He was buried and he was raised in accordance with Scripture. If you take away any part of this central core then your message ceases to be Christian. Theologians and scholars will call it our *kerygma*. A word that derives from a Greek word for “preaching.” It is the irreducible core of the Christian message. It is the kernel, or the seed that germinated and produced the Christian church. You are sitting in these pews today because of this message.

This *kerygma*, this message of first importance, is rooted in a history, a history that happened within our human space and our human time. It is rooted in the history of God’s actions through Jesus Christ. Paul is not telling the Corinthians to just take his word for it. He gives them a laundry list of witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. His implication is that the Corinthians could ask Peter and the rest of the twelve about it. There is another group of 500 people that they could ask. They could also contact James. Paul is doubling down on his claim that Jesus is resurrected because he is drawing up witnesses. Now you might protest that the Corinthians could not just call up these witnesses like we can today. I admit that communication was harder in the ancient world. However, it did happen. After all, we are reading from Paul’s 1st letter to the Corinthian church. The letter itself is proof that communication happened.

Paul's Conclusion about our hope and Jesus's Resurrection

But Paul does not end with Jesus’s resurrection in the past. He connects it to our future hope and our faith. As Christians we look forward to a future resurrection in which the corruptibility we experience as a consequence of our sin will be removed. We look forward to the recreation of this world in which sin and death will be removed. Paul is arguing here that our future hope in the new earth and our resurrection depends on Jesus’s resurrection. If the resurrection of Jesus did not happen, then everything we believe will be in vain.

The Nature of the Resurrection

A Bodily Resurrection

We need to examine the nature of the resurrection for just a few minutes. We need to understand the nature of Jesus’s resurrection because it is the first fruit of the resurrection that we

hope for. Paul has linked them together and to better understand one is to better understand the other.

The first thing we need to understand is that Jesus's resurrected body had some kind of tangible form. Paul's witnesses saw something. His form is something that manifests itself in physical ways. I do not believe Jesus's resurrection body was physical in all the same ways that our bodies are physical. It couldn't be. First of all, in the gospel accounts, he appears and disappears at will. That's not something we can do. It is a body transformed. I think we should concentrate on the difference between reanimation and resurrection.

There are a number of stories in the Bible in which people are raised from the dead. Perhaps the most famous is that of Lazarus. Jesus woke Lazarus from the dead. He reanimated a body to the existence it experienced before death. His death is not recorded to my knowledge, but presumably Lazarus went on to die another day. In Jesus's resurrection, his body was raised into glory. It is a body transformed. It is rid of the corruptibility that we experience. It is no longer subject to decay. Romans 6:9 reiterates this point:

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

However, it is still a physically tangible body. Consider doubting Thomas. In John 20:24-28, the disciple Thomas declares that he will not believe that the Christ has risen until he has seen and touched his wounds. A little later Jesus appears to Thomas and lets him touch his wounds. Thomas believes as his doubts are satisfied. The idea that Jesus's resurrection body was physical is also supported by 1 John 1:1-4:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Notice all the appeals to the physical senses. Notice particularly the part where John emphasizes touching “with his hands.” Of course, John could be talking about Jesus in general, but I am not alone in thinking that he is actually talking about the resurrected Jesus when he talks about what he has seen, heard, and touched. It makes sense when you pair it with the doubting Thomas story in the Gospel of John.

The New World Order

You may ask why I am making such a big deal about Jesus’s resurrected body being a physical body? It is important because it is integral to the biblical hope we have concerning our future. I imagine a number of us here have a vague conception that says, “physical is bad; spiritual is good.” Everything that is physical in this world eventually decays. Our physical bodies age and die. Plants wither and die. Trees that can live for thousands of years eventually rot from the inside. Even rocks erode away. It is not hard to see how we came to the conclusion that physical is bad and spiritual is good.

This conclusion is probably the foundation of the idea that many of us have that our future hope is that one day our bodies will die and our souls will float away no longer encumbered by this prison of flesh to that yonder shore where we will live in a place we call heaven with God and our departed relatives. That may be true. In fact, I hope that it is true, but the Bible says shockingly little about it because that should not be our ultimate hope according to Scripture. The biblical hope for the future is much, much bigger than that.

In order to begin to understand this biblical hope for the future we need to get rid of this idea that physical is bad and spiritual is good. Throw it in the trash. It is an idea that we got from Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato, and it has no place in biblical thinking. The Bible says that God created the physical and he created it good. We are the ones who messed it up. We are the ones who sinned and introduced death into the world. It is not that the physical is bad in itself. The problem is that the physical is corruptible and that is our fault.

The biblical hope for the future is that God is recreating this earth into something even better than it was originally, and it will be a physical recreation. Our physicality will not be removed; it will be transformed. The corruptibility will be removed because sin and death will be

completely defeated. When we look towards the end of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul talks in victorious language about this transformation. The mortal will “put on” immortality and the perishable will “put on” imperishable. They will not be robbed of their physical form.

This physical/spiritual dichotomy has been pervasive because we have three different cultures and languages — Hebrew, Greek, and English — in dialog here and they simply do not have the vocabulary to adequately express one another. This is evident in 1 Corinthians 15:44:

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Now you could say, “Daniel this disproves your point.” I do not have the time to explain why the translators of this verse choose to translate it this way. It is a long and regrettable history. I am asking you to trust me that English does not have a good succinct way to translate the Greek here and know that I am not alone by a long shot on this opinion. A laundry list of biblical scholars agree with me. What Paul is saying here is that we now have a physical body that is animated or driven by our own desires. Our resurrected bodies will be animated and driven by the desires of the Holy Spirit. It will be in tune with the Holy Spirit because the power of sin will be defeated. But it will still be a physical body.

This point is important because it is indicative of the kind of future hope we have in the gospel. The hope of our Christian gospel is not an escape from this sinful world into an ethereal heaven. The hope of the gospel is a victory and conquering of this physical world infested with sin by the powers of heaven. Our hope in the gospel is for life in the fullest sense of the word, physical and spiritual.

For Paul, this hope of life in the full completely hinges on the truth of Jesus’s resurrection. If Jesus has not been resurrected from the dead, then our hope dissipates. The biblical scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way, “The whole argument [1 Corinthians 15] establishes, with rock-solid theology and considerable rhetorical power, the point that the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah is the starting-point and means whereby the creator, in

completing the work of rescuing and renewing the original creation, will raise all the Messiah's people to new bodily life."¹

In other words, Paul is arguing that in the resurrection of Jesus, God has initiated the process of recreating the entire creation, and the resurrection of those who are saved in Christ is a crowning moment of that recreation. It is the ultimate hope we all have in Christ. I am making a big deal about this because I want our ultimate hopes to be pointed in the right direction and at the right things.

A Public Event

We need to go back to the point that Paul made at the beginning of chapter 15. Our hopes are dependent on the resurrection of Jesus. Now the entire ministry of Jesus up to and including his resurrection was what we can call a public event. In other words, it happened in our shared history, within our space. We can view the resurrection with the lens of a critical historian. It can be studied as history. We can ask questions like, "Was there an empty tomb?" "Did people really see the resurrected Jesus?" We can ask these questions as historians.

The frustrating thing to me is that a number of scholars, some of whom I have a great deal of respect for, will talk out of both sides of their mouth on this issue. They will argue that the resurrection definitely happened, but the historian cannot study it because it is not history in the regular sense of a modern academic history. This is probably because of the audacious nature of the claim. A man has rose from the dead incorruptible. This claim does not cohere with our experience. Dead people stay dead. The resurrection of Jesus has no analogy that we can point to. We cannot make complete sense out of it. Therefore, we say that it is something that historians cannot authenticate.

However, that is a cop out. Historians can ask questions. Was there an empty tomb? Either the Romans or the Jews could have put a quick end to this troublesome sect if they could have produced a body. Could you claim that the disciples stole the body and then claimed Jesus was resurrected? Maybe, you have no evidence. What about the other eye witnesses? Could you claim that they all suffered from the same hallucination? Maybe, but you have to allow that this

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 337.

is a pretty far-fetched idea. By appealing to the witnesses, Paul is making his claim concrete that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

We, as historians, can view the available evidence and ask the question, “what best explains all of this evidence?” My firm contention is that the best way to explain all of the available evidence is that Jesus really did bodily rise from the dead. I cannot prove that beyond any shadow of a doubt. A thorough skeptic can question anything. You could construct plausible alternative theories, but you have to ask whether they are probable. Our faith in the resurrection should be based on more than wishful thinking. We should do more than just hope that this audacious claim is true. Our belief in the resurrection should be based on the entirely reasonable conclusion that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead publicly, within our history and within our space.

The Nature of Our Faith

The "Leap" of Faith?

So the foundation of our faith and our hope is based on the reasonable conclusion that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Our next problem is that the word “faith” has been much abused in our culture. You might think of faith within the context of a “leap of faith.”

To illustrate this point, I thought about showing you a clip from an Indiana Jones movie. But I googled copyright laws and the internet told me that it wasn't a good idea to play a movie clip in a public setting without the express written consent of the rights holder. Anyway, the scene is from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Some of you young ones may have never seen this movie. It was the last good Indiana Jones movie; before he survived a nuclear explosion in a refrigerator. In the movie, Indiana Jones and his father are seeking the legendary holy grail. To get to the grail (and save his father), Indiana Jones has to go through a set of three trials. The last one is a so-called “leap” of faith. He comes to an apparent chasm and he is supposed to just step off the edge of the chasm in faith that he will make it to the other side. He does take this step and his foot lands on a bridge that was camouflaged by blending into the far wall. Maybe I should have just risked showing the clip.

The point is that Indiana Jones had no good reason to take that step. He ignored all his faculties of reason and stepped off into the abyss. This is a popular portrayal of faith, but I do not think it does justice to what faith should properly be. In fact, I think this conception of faith does

more harm than good. It sets up faith in opposition to reason and that is unhelpful. It suggests that faith is simply what we turn to when we get to the limits of human understanding. It makes faith basically wishful thinking.

Reasonable Faith

However, faith is much more than wishful thinking. Hebrews 11:1 states that, **“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** That assurance and conviction has a foundation in the past actions of God. Now as I considered this sermon the thought occurred to me, “am I saying that you can reason your way into a saving faith.” That would be a problem. Salvation would then be a human mental endeavor rather than the work of God.

But that is not what I am arguing. I am arguing that faith looks forward with hope to the future based on the past actions of God. But, as the writer of Hebrews says, faith is assurance and conviction. It is a complete confidence in God that one would stake his very life on. I have argued that belief in the resurrection is reasonable. I suppose someone could say, “Sure, the resurrection is probable. I would put its chances of being true at 60-75%. So you could extrapolate that and conclude that it is possible that there will be a future resurrection.” That is an example of human reason, but that is not saving faith. Saving faith is the firm conviction that Christ has died for our sins and indeed been raised from the dead and that our own resurrection is secure because of it. That sure confidence is only possible in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our sinful nature will never allow such a sure confidence on our own.

My real point here is that saving faith is not the opposite of rationality. The Holy Spirit does not force us to become something other than human to have faith in God. He does not force us to assent to the equivalent of $2+2=5$. It is not an abdication of reason or a sacrifice of the intellect. I am really making an apologetic point that a saving faith is entirely compatible with human reason even though saving faith is not possible with reason alone. It requires the Holy Spirit.

Faith with a Foundation

So faith is an assurance and a conviction. It is a sure confidence and trust in God and the things that he has in store for us. This confidence is intertwined with what God has done for us in

the past. After defining faith Hebrews 11 goes on to recount a history of great acts of faith. The implication is, “look what faith has done in the past. Therefore, go forward in confident faith bolstered by this great cloud of witnesses.”

The faith of Israel was tightly connected to its history. Israel had confidence in God’s future for them because he was the God of the exodus. He brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He will lead them into glory. Look at their rituals. The Passover meal is set up to remind its participants about what God has done for them in the past. The people of Israel also had a practice of setting up witnessing stones. Take for example 1 Samuel 7, in which Samuel defeats the Philistines and they erect a stone as a monument and called it Ebenezer, “Until now God has helped us.” We have a favorite hymn that references it. “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’ve come.” This connection between faith and history is a reason that the Israelites were obsessive about recording their history. The history of Israel is in part a record of God’s actions in and through Israel. The past actions of God anchor a confidence in the future with God.

The Christian situation is even better. We have something even greater than the exodus out of Egyptian slavery. We have deliverance from the powers of sin and death through the grace God has shown us in Christ. That deliverance is rooted in the past concrete actions of God in Christ in his death and resurrection. This is Paul’s argument. This also brings the quote from Wolfhart Pannenberg on the back of your bulletin into focus. Pannenberg stood up against the prevailing winds of the twentieth century and said no. The resurrection is a historical event subject to the rigors of historical investigation. If it is not a historically true event, then we might as well give up on Christianity. The reason it is so important is that it is the foundation of future hope. Just like Paul argued 2000 years ago. I like how Pannenberg puts (through his German translator). **Because of the resurrection, the Christian has confidence that God’s “final word, whatever form its fulfillment in us may take, is not death, but life.”**² Because of our Spirit enabled confidence in the resurrection of Jesus we are confident that God is leading us to life in its fullest sense — physically, spiritually, and everything else in between.

The Implications of Faith in History

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, “How is God Revealed to Us,” in *Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977), 59.

Resurrection as a Paradigmatic Event

We can now make the important turn and talk about our hope for the future should affect our present. I believe that the resurrection is a paradigmatic event. Paradigmatic is a big word based off of paradigm. A paradigm is a model or a framework we use to make sense of what we observe.

In the sciences, sometimes something called a paradigm shift occurs. A new groundbreaking theory will change how we understand and explain what is happening around us. A famous example is Newtonian physics. Isaac Newton was an extraordinary scientist. He articulated a number of principles that describe the motion of objects under the influence of forces. In the early 20th century, a guy named Albert Einstein came along with a theory of relativity. Einstein's models better explained the data than Newtonian models. We are still seeing the same data. We just explain our observations through a different paradigm.

The Change in Optics

I would argue that the resurrection is something akin to a paradigm shift. It should change the way that those of us who have faith in Christ see and explain the world. We will see much of the same data, but we will see it through a new lens of hope.

For example, although nothing is impossible with God, having faith in Christ is not going to miraculously change the numbers in your bank account. But it should change how look at those numbers. It should change your motivations for that bank account.

You will still sin unfortunately. But your faith in the resurrection should change how you confront that sin. It should lead you into repentance and renewal.

Unfortunately, people still suffer under oppressive human regimes and institutions. We like to think that slavery has ended in the U.S., but human trafficking still happens in numbers that should grieve us and give us great pause.

Unfortunately, people around the world still live under oppressive governments. We have it pretty good here in the U.S., but I imagine a number of us, no matter which side of the aisle we agree with, are more than a little concerned about what is going on in our own government. It helps to remember the political impact of Paul's message to Roman citizens. I like how N.T. Wright puts it. The Christian gospel that culminates in the recreation of the world is a **“coded but powerful reminder to the young church, living in Caesar's world, that Jesus is Lord**

and that at his name every knee would bow.”³ That is an incredibly powerful message to those suffering under oppressive human institutions and regimes.

Unfortunately, we still suffer death. Our loved ones will eventually die and we will eventually die as well, unless Jesus comes back before that. Faith in the resurrection should change how we deal with death. We should not grieve as those without hope. That was Paul’s message to the Thessalonians. Here in 1st Corinthians, he ends this gospel presentation with a victory song over death. Listen to his words in verse 51-57,

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 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.”

55 “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

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.

This is a taunt. This is Paul, with firm faith in the gospel, staring down death and telling it, “You don’t own me anymore.” Without the resurrection, these words would mean nothing. With the firm foundation of the resurrection, these words are everything.

Unfortunately, we cannot always be filled with Paul’s confidence. There will most likely be times when this trust that you have in God will be severely tested. Sometimes life just isn’t that easy. You look around and you just cannot see the life that God promises. You retreat to the deep dark recesses of your mind; all you see is death.

It is in these times that history becomes your anchor and your way forward. Like Israel, you know what God has done for you in the past. You know that there have been victories before this present darkness. Most importantly, you know what God has done in the death and

³ Wright, 338.

resurrection of Jesus. That is your concrete history. That history should bring your future into at the very least a dim focus. It should bring the hymn to your lips, even if it is barely a whisper,

Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come,
And I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God,
He to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.

The strength to move forward in our darkest of days lies in the past history that we have in God in Jesus and his mighty acts of redemption. This strength is only available in Christ. Without Christ, you only have your own strength to count on and that strength will eventually founder upon the rocks of this world.

With Christ you have a firm foundation and a sure certain future. As the band plays a final song, ask yourself "Do I have that kind of confidence in Christ that Paul is illustrating in 1st Corinthians?" If not, find someone here to talk to about it. There are any number of people here that would love to have that conversation. If you have faith in Christ, but are suffering through a present darkness, use this time to pray that God would grant you strength. All of us should come together and sing praises to our God for the salvation he offers, that we experience now and for the glorious future that he has in store for us.