



Sermon – April 19, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

1 Corinthians 15:19 – 26

Psalms 110:1

Hebrews 2:14 - 15

I want to invite you to open your Bibles with us this morning as we turn our attention to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. 1 Corinthians is where we'll be spending our time this morning. And it is such a joy to be with you today. How I long to be with you in person. In fact, over the last two weeks, Cami and I have had the opportunity to do 27 Zoom calls with the congregation for us to start to get to know you and you to get to know us. And so, Steve, I need a ruling here coming up on whether we should count this as number 28 or not. But as we gather together this morning, our focus is not on this empty church, but the empty tomb. It's not about who is standing in the pulpit, but who is seated on the throne. And that's exactly what Paul calls our attention to in 1 Corinthians 15 beginning in verse 19 if you follow along with me.

¹⁹If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we come to You in this time, we are coming to Your word longing that Your Spirit would work in our hearts to change our lives and make us more like Jesus. And we pray that You do that even now. And we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, if you've ever been on a Saturday at Kyle Field, you know what it means to be surrounded by crowds. But I've experience crowds even beyond what that is like at some of the holy sites in Israel. If you've never had the chance to go over there to visit, it is stunning to be surrounded by people as you see these different areas where amazing things have happened in the Bible. And that's why it was so stunning this past week during holy week to see these holy sites shut down around this country where Jesus once walked. You see, what would normally be surrounded by

thousands of people was now empty. And I couldn't help but notice that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, perhaps the most treasured site in tradition, the place where it tells us that Jesus was not only crucified, but buried. Even that location was shut. It was locked up. It was secured. And I couldn't help but think about the first time that people tried to lock down the tomb of Jesus. You remember that story back in the gospels after Jesus dies and He's taken off the cross, He is placed in that tomb, the stone is rolled in front of it, and what do they do? They attempt to secure it by surrounding it with Roman guards who will defend it. How'd that work out for them? You see, we know that tomb was, that stone was rolled away. That tomb is now empty. And what that reminds us of in this week after Easter is the hope that we have of the resurrection that helps us to endure even in the midst of the hardships of our reality.

And that's exactly what Paul is speaking to us about this morning from 1 Corinthians 15. Because he is writing to a church in Corinth, in this commercial city who is experiencing hardship. There's distress from the outside. There's division on the inside. And as he begins to bring this book to a close, 1 Corinthians 15, focuses on the resurrection of Christ. And in this passage, he draws a connection between the resurrection and the kingdom. And there's a reason for that. Because the resurrection of Jesus is the turning point of the clash of the kingdoms that we see throughout the Scriptures. See, as you look at the Bible, it's unfolding as one story where God creates the kingdom in Genesis 1 and 2. But it's corrupted by Adam and Even when they fall into sin. And throughout the Old Testament, there's this longing, this hope, that one-day God would send a king to make all things right. And in the gospels we see God doing exactly that in His own Son, Jesus. He dies on the cross. He is raised from the dead to usher in that new creation kingdom that Paul is speaking of here. And in this moment, Paul is calling us this morning to walk in the way of the kingdom. To have hope in the resurrection in the midst of the hardship of our realities. And as we look at the text, I want you to notice two ways that the kingdom provides hope for us even in the hardships of our daily life. The first one you'll see right there in the text we've already read. In verses 19 through 23, Paul shows us that the way of the kingdom offers a living hope. Look back at verse 19. It tells us that if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. There should be a sorrow for us if our hope is only in this life. But instead, what Paul is showing us is that the way the kingdom offers us a living hope that goes beyond this life only. He speaks there that if our hope was only in the life that we live right now, we should be pitied. That there should be a sorrow for us. That's the imagery in the original language. Perhaps if we wanted to translate it into modern, Southern vernacular, Paul is saying that if our hope is only in this life, well bless our hearts. Because that's all we've got. But he says, that is not at all the case for us. In fact, he would have remembered the way that people probably felt that way for Jesus as He is strapped to that cross. They're passing by Him saying, "He thought He was the King of the Jews and yet He is nothing but a common criminal. He thought He could have eternal life and yet here He is dying on the cross." There was likely a pity for Him there that Paul warns us we should have as well if all we've got is limited hope. But what he's telling us instead is that if there is no resurrection, there is no hope. But because there is a resurrection, there is a living hope. That's what Peter speaks about in 1 Peter chapter 1 in verse 3. He speaks of how we are born again to a living hope. One that is not limited to this life only, but is a lasting hope for all eternity.

But notice what he does next in verses 21 and 22. Paul also shows us that the way of the kingdom, offers a living hope that reverses the curse of Adam. You see, in 21 and 22 he draws two contrasts between Adam and Jesus. Look back at verse 21. What he does there is he talks

about how by one man came death, but yet by the other man has come also the resurrection from the dead. So we remember in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve partake of forbidden fruit, God promises them that if they eat from that tree, they shall die. And Paul was telling us here that's exactly what happens. They usher in death to the creation. But what happens is that even though their sinful surrender to the serpent leads to death, here has come a new Adam to make all things right. Jesus, as it tells us there. Who brings about the resurrection of the dead. But he doesn't just make that one contrast. He also makes a second back in verse 22. Do you see it there? He says, "In Adam all die, and yet in Christ all shall be made live." And so it's not just Adam's sin in the garden affected Him only. That sin corrupted the entire universe. The fall of sin affects every one of our hearts. We now stand before God just as Adam condemned and worthy of death. But Paul tells us here in verse 22 that in Christ, we have been made alive. We have a living hope. One that allows us to stand in the midst of hardships. And the question for each one of us this morning is, "Have you ever experienced that living hope?" Now I'm curious how many of you grew up going to Vacation Bible School like me? See, I was just in it for the sports and the snow cones. But Jesus was in it to save me. I remember as our family bounced around Texas growing up with my dad in the oil business, we spent a couple years out in Midland. And when I went to Vacation Bible School, I heard more about Jesus. And I came home and asked a bunch of questions of my parents. And they took me in to meet with one of the pastors and we talked about the gospel. And he showed me the way that my sin that separated me from God, but that the cross had made a bridge to make a way that I couldn't make on my own. So that I might find forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God. And in that moment, 30 years ago, I embraced this living hope that Paul speaks of here. Have you?

Maybe you're a child sitting there right next to your parents watching big church right now online for one of the first times and God's working in your heart. Maybe you need to accept that living hope as well. Maybe you're a student whose been out of school and you're doing things that nobody but you and God know about and you feel that conviction for sin. You're burdened down; you need deliverance from it. And Christ is offering a living hope to you today because He was born, we can be born again. Because He is living, we can have a living hope. Because Christ reverses the curse of Adam. But notice also in this part of the passage. We see that the way the kingdom offers a living hope that provides a foretaste of the kingdom that is to come. You see it bookended here on verse 20 and verse 23. Paul speaks about the way that Christ is our firstfruits. The firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. But he says this by beginning in verse 20 by saying, "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead." He couldn't be more emphatic. He knows this is a fact. And how does he know it's true? It's not just because he's heard others teach it. But because he's experienced the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road and it changed everything for him. He got a foretaste of that coming kingdom and it reshaped who he is. And he speaks there of Jesus as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. So we should be asking ourselves, "What are the firstfruits? What is that idea in the Bible?" Well if you were to look back in the Old Testament, what you find is this pattern where God's people are called to give the first and best of what they have to God. So if you look back in Exodus 23, you would see them bringing the first and best of the harvest. If you look back at Leviticus 23, you would see them bringing the first and best of their animals for the sacrifices. And, in fact, in Exodus 22, you would see them bringing even the first and best of their own offspring. You had this connection in the Old Testament between bringing the firstfruits and bringing the tithe. That the people will come and offer their best to God, their first 10%, the beginning of the harvest,

saying, “You are more important than anything else in the world. And by taking this step of faith, we trust You for Your provision in our lives.”

I just have to say how grateful I am for you as a church for your faithfulness in giving just like that, even in these hard times. You have truly blessed us with the way you have continued to provide financially for this church. The way that many of you have taken steps to shift your giving online. You are reflecting the pattern that we see right here. But when Paul is speaking of Christ as firstfruits, the focus is not on any sort of financial gift. The focus is on, instead, a spiritual gift. That in the gospel, what Jesus is doing is ushering in a new creation. You see, just this weekend was our youngest son, Hudson’s, fifth birthday. And one of you was so kind as to send him a surprise Tiff’s Treats box of cookies that we enjoyed. And if you’re a kid in the room, there are grandkids sitting next to your grandparents, you know this situation I’m about to describe. Imagine it’s you and a sibling and there’s only two pieces of dessert left and you’ve been asked to go get the dessert to bring it to the two of them. And one of them is a nice big piece that looks delicious and the other is tiny and looks old and not near as appetizing. And you get to decide who gets which one. Which one are you going to keep for yourself? And which one are you going to give to your sibling? Every one of us, we know deep down, if we’re being honest, we’re going to keep the good stuff for ourselves and give the leftovers to someone else. That is the natural way of human nature. But what Jesus is showing us here in 1 Corinthians 15 is God turns that upside down. He takes the best of all there is in the universe, His own Son, He sends Him to earth, He raises Him from the dead as the firstfruits in order to signal that in His death and resurrection, God has made a down payment on the new creation kingdom He’s bringing to the world. Christ is our firstfruits. And yet it tells us in verse 23 that He’s the firstfruits, but then God will raise those who belong to Christ. What an amazing way to have described the Christian life. That we are a people who belong to Christ. That’s the picture that he’s giving there. And what we have in this moment, is Paul is describing the kingdom of God in two senses. One the one hand, the kingdom of God is already here. It’s now come and we’ve seen Him fully defeat His enemies through His death and resurrection. And yet on the other hand, we see that the kingdom is not yet fully come. It hasn’t been finally realized at Christ’s return. There’s a sense in which it’s both already and not yet at the same time. I can’t help but think about that right now as we’re in the midst of this transition. You see, my family travelled down to College Station several weeks ago in anticipation of our original in view of a call weekend back in March. It’s as if we’re here, but not yet here. And so we’re in a new location, but I’m still in the same old vocation doing my job at the ERLC. Our kids are in new surroundings and yet they’re not in a new school. They’re still doing their stuff from back there. There’s this sense in which we’re both here and not yet here at the same time. As a matter of fact, I’ve been waiting to get down here if the Lord brings me here because I’ve been living in a land where they think pulled pork is God’s gift to barbeque. And I’m surrounding by all these places that have amazing brisket and yet we can’t enjoy it. There’s a sense where we’re here and yet not here at the same time. And that’s the image that Paul is giving us here of the kingdom. That it is both now and not yet and that should raise a question for us. If we are the ones who belong to Christ, how should that shape the way that we live?

What it tells us is that we need to remember our kingdom promise. That God has called us to salvation and to another kingdom to resist the kingdom of this world. But we don’t just remember our kingdom promise; we remember our kingdom priorities. That we’re to die to the self, to seek first the kingdom, to serve for the sake of others, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But it's not just about reordering our kingdom priorities; it's to remember our kingdom presence. So if someone were to say to you, "Phillip or Steve or John, what is the kingdom of God look like?" The best answer you could give them is, "Why don't you show up at 9:45 A.M. the next Sunday at Central and I'll show you. Because the church is the foretaste of the kingdom that God has provided us. He also calls us to remember our kingdom principles. That in this time between the times, we are to live in a way that honors God. In the way that we stand for the least of these. That we fight for the life of the unborn. And we stand up for God's design for marriage and family in a secularizing culture. We defend religious freedom for all people so that we can seek God and worship Him as He calls us to here in Scripture. But He also desires us who belong to Christ to remember our kingdom priorities. That's why I'm so encouraged by the way that you're serving in this moment. I've been told by our staff that we have had more people volunteer to serve others in our church and in our community during the Coronavirus than those who've actually made requests. Because you're ready to serve. You're ready to put the kingdom in action just as Paul calls us to. Because in the first portion of this passage, what we're seeing here is that Paul is reminding us that Christ's resurrection is now our resurrection. That His kingdom is our kingdom. That His deliverance is our deliverance. That His victory is our victory. And His living hope is now our living hope.

But I want you to notice with me the way that this passage goes on beginning in verse 24. Because we see a second idea about the way the kingdom right here where Paul will show us the way of the kingdom offers a future hope. Look back at verse 24 with me and see what the text says.

²⁴Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

So Paul now turns his attention from our living hope to what will be our future hope. And we see there in verse 24 that the way the kingdom offers a future hope based on the deliverance of the kingdom. Paul speaks there at the start of 24 by saying, "Then comes the end." In the original language, this is the word *télos*. And it doesn't just mean the completion of something, but its fulfillment. I've seen headlines around the country about how Coronavirus has changed the way that we entertain and occupy ourselves. And one of the things that's had a resurgence is the use of jigsaw puzzles. And you know what it's like to work through a puzzle and all the hardships and it starts to come together. And as you place that last piece into the puzzle, it doesn't just mean that you're finished. It means that there is a fulfillment. That the picture that was once created, that was divided when the puzzle was made, has now been restored and made right as it was originally intended to reflect. And isn't that way that God is working in the kingdom even now? That the kingdom He created, that's been corrupted and shattered by sin, Christ is restoring. He is bringing it back together. That at the end there will not just be a completion, but a fulfillment of all that God has designed for the world. And how will that happen? It tells us there in verse 24 that Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. He will hand it over. He will bring it back to Him. And how does that even make any sense? Well it makes sense because of John 3:16. Because Jesus tells us that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him shouldn't perish, but have everlasting life. God the Father has put God the Son on mission to reclaim His kingdom. And once that is completed at Christ's return He will deliver it back to God.

But how do we know that mission is complete? It tells us there at the end of verse 24. That Christ will deliver the kingdom back to the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. There will be victory over the spiritual forces that resist the kingdom of God. Now the Corinthian church would have uniquely understood this language when Paul was writing to them. Because they were living under the rule of a Roman empire. Where whenever there was rebellion or insurrection about, towards the leadership of the emperor, he would send out his armies to subdue the rebellion. To strike it down. Or if they were to look back in their Hebrew Bible at what happened in the people of Israel as they entered the promised land. They would see the same pattern. That God brings His people into the promised land and they defeat their enemies. They are called to destroy every rule and authority and power that stands against them. Now we know as we look back at the Old Testament that they failed in that mission. But what Paul was showing us here is that Christ comes as a new Israel. That succeeds where they fail and carries out the mission into total fulfillment. He is the One that brings dominion over His enemies so that He might bring deliverance of the kingdom. That has everything to do with the way that you and I live today. Because if God is promising that there is one day that Jesus will finally defeat His enemies and deliver the kingdom of God back to the Father, then that changes the way that we war against those spiritual enemies even now. I know in this moment of crisis, where we're isolated, where many of us have experienced financial hardship, that isolation can lead to loneliness. That loneliness can lead to discouragement. That discouragement can lead to depression. Or if that's not you, maybe instead that isolation leads to vulnerability to sin and sin pattern that you wouldn't find yourself in any other time. And you know that you are struggling and drowning under conviction for the things that you are doing that are wrong. What Paul is reminding us here is we have a future hope. That Jesus will deliver us from our enemies fully and finally in the future and that gives us the confidence that if we depend on the Spirit, even right now, that He might bring deliverance from those challenges even today. But notice also in verse 25 that Paul speaks about the way of the kingdom offering a future hope secure through final victory. If you look back at the text there, it says, He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. And when we first showed up here in College Station, we needed to go to the local grocery store to pick up some of the essentials we would need. And I kid you not, when we walked into the front door, we're surrounded by these hordes of people. This was right when everybody was starting to shut things down and I'm seeing people that almost are ready to fight over the last toilet paper or some of the meat that's available. There's this constant eyeing of everybody around you looking to see what the competition is for what you need. And in that moment, the first song I heard playing over the loudspeakers around us was the theme song from the movie Rocky, Eye of the Tiger. And I thought this is just too fitting. It's as if we're all in this rivalry together battling against the flesh and blood around us for those things that we are dependent on. And there can be temptation in life to see what we see around us, those who are flesh and blood, as our enemies. But instead, Paul is giving us a different picture here, isn't he? He's speaking here of spiritual enemies. Forces that wage war against the kingdom of light. And yet he's telling us that there is coming a day where every one of them will be placed under Christ's feet. In fact, he is speaking of and picking up on language that would be familiar to the Corinthian church; who would remember back to the book of Psalms in Psalm 110 where the text speaking of the coming Messiah. And in verse 1 it says;

¹The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand, and until I make Your enemies Your footstool.

Or they would've remembered back in the conquest of the promised land. The way that Joshua 10 describes it when Israel defeated some of the Canaanite kings. What they did is they'd put their foot upon their necks. It is a sign of victory and a sign of submission of the enemies. Paul is telling us that there is coming a day, one that we long for and await, that the victory that Christ is fully accomplished in the cross and resurrection will be finally realized at His return. And in this in between time, we are waiting for that moment. We are longing for that situation. And yet we do not see it. But knowing that it is yet to come allows us to sustain and to persevere in the hardships we encounter in life. And that's why it's so fitting that the way that this text ends back in verse 26 is by Paul drawing our attention to the way of the kingdom and how it offers a future hope that destroys the power of death. Look back at verse 26. He says:

²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Now perhaps some of us while we are quarantined and can't get out much are doing more reading. Or maybe you're watching more movies or binging more Netflix. There's a common storyline in any action film or book where the good guys wage war against the bad guys. And as you come to the end of that moment, what will happen is the good guys increasingly knock off more and more of the bad guys. And they essentially work their way up the ladder to where the last battle is always between the most important good guy and the most significant bad guy. That good versus evil clash comes at the heart of so many stories. And there's a reason for that. It's reflecting what Paul is speaking up here. That there is coming a day where there will be a last battle. And that last battle will be Jesus versus death. And the reason that death is the last enemy is because up until when Jesus walked this earth 2,000 years ago, death was undefeated. No one could top it. From Adam onward, every one of us has faced death. And that's why the altar of Hebrews reminds us of the way that we are so often gripped by a fear of death. In Hebrews 2, verses 14 and 15 he says this:

¹⁴Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

If we're being honest with ourselves in our quiet moments, there's a sense in which we all fear death. There's a sense in which we all feel a slavery to that sin and yet what Paul is reminding us here is that there is coming a day where Jesus will return and death will be defeated. As the book of Revelation talks about in chapter 20 that death will be thrown into the lake of fire. That the fear of death shall be no more for those who are found in Christ. And the call of the gospel for us this morning is to reject the fear of death and to receive the One who has conquered death. Because what we know from the gospel that Paul preaches here is that there was the death of death in the death of Christ. That He made a way for you and me to be set free if we look to Him for salvation. He died the death that we deserved so that we can experience the eternal life that we didn't deserve. And the call of the gospel to each one of us this morning is that we embrace Jesus, to repent of our sins, to turn to Him, to look to the One that will bring victory over death in the future and say, "You can deliver me from the wages of sin which is death in my own life right now." Have you looked to Him for that salvation? The sites around the holy land are quiet this week again. There's no one that's gathering to enter into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

And I was captured by a story I read about this week in which they interviewed the man who holds the keys to the church. And this man, the responsibility of unlocking and locking the church and holding the keys to it has passed down from generation to generation in his family for hundreds and hundreds of years. And you know what he said? The last time that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that has the spot where Jesus was buried and resurrected, the last time it was closed indefinitely like it is right now was in the 1300's during the black plague. And here is this man who holds the keys to reentering the place and unlocking the tomb that is given us. But it served to me as a reminder as I read about him holding the keys that he might hold the physical keys to that church, but the gospel tells us that the church holds the keys to the kingdom. That in Jesus, we have been given the task to see the kingdom advance, to share the gospel faithfully, to press on with the commission that Christ has called us to, and to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. And the call of that gospel to each one of us this morning is to walk in the way of the kingdom.

Will you close in prayer with me?

Lord, we're coming to You in dependence. We're coming to You in desperation. We're coming to You pledging our allegiance to Christ and His kingdom. And we're grateful for Your faithfulness, God. The way you poured it out for each one of us in Christ. And we're rejoicing over the rescue that You've given us by the power of Your Spirit. And we're longing for Your return. And in this moment, Lord, I pray that You would use this time to convict our hearts by Your Spirit. To strengthen us today to walk in the way of the kingdom and to help us to trust You in all things. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.