

Battered, Weary, Divided?

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Dated: 28.07.2019

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15

Sometimes I go through seasons when I get a little frustrated with church. You go through those seasons when you don't really connect; you come because you know you need to be here and sitting at home is not a good option. I can't put my finger on it; there's nothing specific or else you would have sorted it out. You know that the challenge is really within you. Recently I went through one of those seasons and I was asking the Lord, "Speak to me in this. This is not the right thing, not the place where I should stay in." There were 2 or 3 things and one of the passages He led me to is what I want to share with you this morning. However, first I wasn't to read a couple of quotes for you.

"There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources of those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness."

I'm going to read the second quote, which is much shorter.

"Battered. Weary. Divided."

The first quote is from Bill Hybels who is the founder of Willow Creek. Some of you might know it is one of the largest churches in the US, and he wrote that some years ago. The second quote is from the elders of his church, just last week – talking about the same church.

What happened in between? What a huge gap between the first and the second quotes! I'm sure that if you were to ask Bill Hybels today, he would have a very different take as well. Some of you might know that the church has gone through a lot of challenges; its leadership had to be changed and the congregation and the people there are lost. They are struggling with it. Obviously the church is nothing as what it was or envisaged it should be.

For most of us, we sometimes go through similar phases. We find that we have a disappointment between what we think a church should be and what it is; not just the local church, but the church at large. Sometimes our disappointment is most acute at church because we expect that it should be right, being God's place. When things are not as they should be at the workplace, we accept it; we give them latitude because after all that's the world. It's imperfect. But when we look at the church where we are placed and we see how little impact the gospel sometimes seems to make into our lives together, how things change so slowly and how relationships within the church can sometimes cause so much heartache, how our worship together sometimes seems so half-hearted – we wonder how we are supposed to live with the gap between what we believe it should be and what it actually is. Is our expectation itself wrong? Sometimes I think at the end of the day, we meet together

as a group of people, but we have so little in common, barely able to find a word to say to one another after the service.

Does God not see the problem? Does God not see the flaw? Does He not have a solution for it? And the answer to that is very important because God Himself, His very character is at stake. And even if we give allowance to the fact that we live in a culture which is much more self-centered than in the past and we want everything quickly and immediately, we still have to be honest that the fulfillment of God's promises seems to be taking an amazingly long time in each of our lives. That's always a constant challenge. And most of us end up worshipping by closing our eyes and shutting out the rest of the world and try to focus directly. Or we simply turn away from the promises of God and say that it's never going to happen.

In that response, there are two ways that we typically have of dealing with the gaps or disappointments we have in our lives.

1. We can settle with the world as it is. If we don't hold on to a belief that things could get better, then we say, "Let's just settle for whatever it is and get on with our lives," – enjoy it in a sense.

Hedonists would say: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." This quote actually comes from Isaiah, and Paul used it later to point to the folly of consumption. It's not about just what we do today. That same quote today is actually used by the world about faith and the church and religion. Hedonism says: "The highest good that we can achieve on earth is our own personal pleasure; life is temporary and transient. So we should stop living for a higher purpose and instead live for the satisfaction of our own basic appetites."

Hedonism has been around for centuries, if not for thousands of years. But of course, today consumerism in our society has taken it to a new level completely. Each one of us, if we are honest, is defined by what we buy, what we eat, what we wear, what we drive. In the words of the Dean of King's College, London: "*Tesco ergo sum*" – we shop, therefore we are. This compulsion to consumption has entered our church as well.

Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Society had taken out a series of ads a few years ago, wherein on all the hoardings on the London buses they wrote, "*There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*" Their insinuation was that religion in general, and the Christian church in particular exert some kind of joy-inhibiting influence on society, and therefore saying that if hedonism wasn't getting any results, it's religion's fault. John Lennon said the same thing many years ago in his song 'Imagine' – Imagine a world without religion, that would equal a world of peace.

This way of experiencing life has also affected our attitude to church. When someone moves into a new area, they go around and start shopping for churches. I see that happening here in India as well. We look around for a church that fits us and we want to find a church that the brand fits. We evaluate the service from what we get out of it, not what we can bring to it. And if we didn't get anything out of the service, then we want a refund. We go shop somewhere else. It's all about us!

2. We can simply say, "Let's forget about reality." Buddhism says that the world around us is an illusion and therefore, pain and suffering is also an illusion. Even us Christians can sometimes get into that space where we feel we can tune out because it is all imaginary. If reality doesn't exist, then how can I be disappointed by it?

The plain fact of the matter, if we are honest, is that it doesn't go away. We are constantly dealing with these challenges in our lives. And no matter how much we try to suppress the hope or the disappointment, both of them continue with us. Perhaps the reason that continues is because they actually point to a reality that exists.

C. S. Lewis wrote: "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. If I find in myself a desire, which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world."

Our appetites point us to God. And Christianity, and our faith, promises us an outrageous hope for the future. But the danger is that we can sometimes focus solely on those promises out there and avoid dealing with the challenges and disappointments in our life today. And that comes into the church as well. So we end up keeping a distance between each one of us. We don't want to get hurt. If you've been in church long enough, at some point of time, you've probably got hurt by somebody. And so you may be present in body but absent in spirit. Or we just try to open ourselves up spiritually to the Lord, close our eyes and as St. Augustine of Hippo said, "We are part of that global invisible church, the Catholic Church." We take comfort in that and forget everybody else who's around us.

The good news is that this is not something new. We are not dealing with something that is not addressed in scripture. As we look at the church in Corinth, we find that Paul has dealt with this issue, and he responds with a word of encouragement for them. A few months back when we looked at chapter 13, the famous chapter on love, he gives us an amazing description about love. He said in vv. 4-7, "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it's not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. And it keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.*"

I think we are all familiar with that. But as we saw then, these were not verses or a letter written to couples. It was not written to those who were getting married. But it was written to a church that was far from demonstrating that love. Those words were written to a church that was wracked with infighting, self-promotion and scandal. That's why Paul had to write to them in chapter 13 so boldly about love, because they just didn't get it. The Corinthian church was neither loving nor kind.

The letter begins in chapter 1 by addressing the divisions in the church. It was wracked with sexual immorality, including one man sleeping with his father's wife. Others were visiting prostitutes. So far were they from not keeping record of each other's wrongs, they were actually taking each other to court. They were certainly not patient with one another. In chapters 10 and 11, we read that they wouldn't even wait for communion; they were pushing each other out of the way and those who got there first took all the food and left nothing for others. Then they went about criticizing each other of what they did eating

where they were outside the church. That was the kind of church that Paul is addressing here and talking about.

There was a complete reality gap between the life of the Corinthian church and God's intention for his people. Nevertheless, Paul writes to them and he asks them to live out that kind of love there and then, in the middle of the messiness of the world and the church that they were in. What the Corinth church shows us is that there will always be a disconnect between what the church is called to be and what it actually is. Someone asked me at the end of the first service: "You didn't tell us what we should do!" The word is – we simply have to persevere. There will always be this gap. We will never find, this side of eternity, the perfect church. As someone said, "If you find it, don't go there. You'll spoil it." We are, each one of us, imperfect, and we make up an imperfect group. But even in the earliest church, in the apostolic times, with the apostles as leaders, there was this gap. And we read that even in the book of Revelation as well.

So how do we navigate the discrepancy between hope and disappointment, between the promise and the reality of the church?

Before Paul closes this first letter to the Corinthians, he has one last major lesson for them, which we see in chapter 15, as he deals with this. In chapter 1, he started by exploring the significance of the crucifixion. And in chapter 15, he ends with a reflection on the significance of Jesus' resurrection. That's the answer he has for us this morning. He is under no illusion about the challenge that the Corinthian church has, but he would say that the resurrection of Jesus is the key to living in the place of the hopelessly hopeful, to quote Krish Kandiah.

First of all, Paul argues that the resurrection is the foundation of the good news of Jesus, the reason for our hope. Luther said that to deny the resurrection is to deny God is God. Perhaps some of us struggle with that. What is the need for the resurrection? Why is it so important? After all, was not the victory won on the cross? Does it really matter whether Jesus physically rose from the dead or just came back as an angel in disguise? Paul wants us to look at the logic of this. In vs. 14 he argues that without the resurrection, the Church has no claim to the good news. *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."* In vs.32 he argues that we might as well give up hope and simply follow the hedonist mantra – *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."*

We would be hopeless if there was no resurrection. If the resurrection did not take place, there is no reason to believe that anything Jesus accomplished on the cross had fulfillment. There is no future for us to look forward to. If Jesus did not conquer death on the cross, then, Paul says, the church's meeting is useless, our preaching is useless, our faith in Christ is futile. If He simply died on the cross and remained in the tomb, then you and I cannot make any claim for the forgiveness of sins to anyone.

Vs. 17 – *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."*

In fact he says that if we are following an unrisen God, then everything that we claim is a sham.

To paraphrase vs.19, *"Those who struggle for the gospel are the most-to-be-pitied members of the human race, since they are undergoing the present hardships for the sake of a future which is not going to happen."* The resurrection is the bedrock of our faith.

After showing what's at stake, from vs.3 on, he reminds his readers in Corinth that the resurrection is not a myth; it's a historical fact – a much-witnessed historical event.

Vs.4-7: *We know that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (that is Peter), and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of who are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.* And he goes on to say how the Lord appeared to him too.

The point that he is making is that on its own, Jesus' death on the Roman cross was nothing unusual. The Romans put thousands of people to death on a cross and they left them there as a vivid reminder to the population – You don't play with us because the cost of revolt against the Roman Empire was death on the cross. But only Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection shows that Jesus' willing self-sacrifice on the cross was effective, that the price was pain and God was satisfied and our sins were really forgiven.

Tim Keller puts it so well when he said, "The Resurrection is a giant receipt stamped across history saying your debt has been paid for and you don't have to pay it ever again." The resurrection is not wish fulfillment, Paul writes to the Corinthians. No one was expecting the resurrection to happen, least of all the disciples. The Jewish worldview was that there would be resurrection at the end of the age, when God would raise them for the final judgment. The resurrection was not a hallucination. This was not one person; this was not two people. It was five hundred people at a time. They had breakfast with Him, they ate with Him. Hallucinations, we know, can happen with one person at one place; it never happened with 500 people in different places. Also it happened over fifty days and most of those people were still alive when he wrote that letter. The disciples had everything to lose if they were preaching a lie. They were putting their lives on the line. But Paul is saying, "No! We are preaching what we know is true, and that's why we are doing what we do."

This is important for each one of us because sometimes people will argue with us; even quoting Richard Dawkins who says that faith is a blind leap. It's not! It's an informed step of trust. We have a historically verified faith.

But how does that help us cope with this paradox of disappointment that we are looking at this morning? The resurrection of Jesus happened two thousand years ago and you and I are still waiting for the fulfillment of some of those promises. The hope that he offered His disciples back then – those rooms that He said He's preparing in His Father's house, the kingdom that He said was near, the end to their suffering – can feel like a hopeless cause after all this time. Sometimes we can actually think that the resurrection seems to disprove rather than prove the promises that God makes.

Paul uses a very powerful metaphor here to help us understand how the resurrection solves the paradox of disappointment.

V20: Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

What were the first fruits? The first fruits were the first part of the harvest, which the Israelites were commanded to bring as an offering to the tabernacle or the temple. They hadn't yet got the full harvest, but this was the best part and the first part. And they brought it as an offering to God in expectation that God would bring to them the rest of the harvest. It was their way of showing gratitude, but also their trust to God for what was yet to come, and thanking Him for His faithfulness and for the fullness of the harvest.

As Leon Morris would say, "The definition of first fruits means it implies later fruits." Jesus' resurrection, as Paul tells us, is first fruit. It gives us a glimpse into the future; it's a taste of

what is going to come. The resurrection of Jesus not only acts as a receipt, pointing backwards to the effectiveness of the crucifixion, but it operates as a guarantee, pointing forwards to that day when there will be the general resurrection and God will raise each one of us up and there will be restoration of all things. The point he wants to make is that this is the beginning, and because of that, we can take it.

Weekends at the supermarket – there's always someone passing around samples to give us a taste of what is available, and make us go and buy that. For this ploy to work, it has to be the same as what we have sampled. That is what Paul is saying – the resurrection of Jesus is the first fruit. It's not the end, but the sample of what's going to come. It is just enough to give us an authentic taste for what is lying ahead. It's God's promise that one day He will restore the universe. And yet today, it leaves us hungry for more. The nuances are very important for us to know. Paul is not saying that everything is done and complete right now, and that our life is completed, everything that God promised is fully realized. No! He is saying that it is neither futile nor futuristic. God has already delivered it, but the main part is still waiting. He is utterly realistic about the state of the church that he is writing to, the world that he lived in.

Yesterday in our small group, we were reminded how he tells the Romans that they have to obey all authority (and he is writing that under Nero⁰. He knows exactly where he is at, and yet he is optimistic. He knows about the future because he has already tasted the first fruits. Yet it can be tempting for us to take this the wrong way. There are two things that we can do wrong, and I want to leave this with you.

- We can assume that because Christ has promised that everything will one day be sorted out, we ought to be able to claim that in advance right now. And that can sometimes lead us down the path of what we call today as the 'prosperity gospel'. There are various forms of the prosperity gospel leaching, but at the heart of all of them is the claim that the fullness of life that God has promised in His Word, can be experienced today. These churches teach that we should expect to see heaven invade our lives in constant healings and constant successes in life, (Heaven can invade, and heaven does invade, but we only get a foretaste today. We don't have it completely) through material blessings and miraculous provisions. And if we are not seeing that in our lives all the time, then something in our faith must be lacking.

But what is wrong with that is if we go down that route, then we are effectively saying that we are not accepting the first fruits but we want all the harvest today. Its like saying – if your father gives you a gift for your birthday, you say give me my whole inheritance today. No! That waits for a future time. Paul knows that there are some things that you and I have to wait for in this life, including physical healing, a life that will one day be completely free of sin and we will be face-to-face with our Savior.

- The opposing viewpoint is that there is nothing really that can be done in our time and age, and only disaster and doom are ahead of us. Therefore the church should have very little hope of having much impact on the world around us. That goes to the other extreme and denies the influence and importance of the resurrection. The idea of the first fruits is that it is the taste of the coming of the Kingdom of God right now here in our times.

There are two more verses that I want to leave with you that talk about the first fruits.

Romans 8:22 Paul writes, *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”*

James 1:18 *“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.”*

In both these passages, Paul and James are saying that we experience the taste of what is to come, but we don't have the full fulfillment today. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we too are a kind of the first fruits.

Paul tells us in Romans that we are groaning at this point. There is a sense of pain, the pain of labor that he is alluding to. As men, we don't know much about it, but it is excruciating from what I hear. But women go through it because of the joy that lies at the end of it, a new life that's coming out of it.

So it is for each one of us today. We live in this time of transition. We are too late for this world to satisfy us and too early for the next heaven that lies ahead. We are an anomaly. We are time travellers who have to live with this contradiction in our day-to-day life and in our present realities. It is critical for us as we go on, and as we deal with life where God has placed us, that we understand these two passages – that the first fruits are a taste of our future. And not just for us – we are first fruits so that it's a benefit to the world at large. God has placed us here, and God placed His church and continues to keep His church on earth so that it can be an expression of His message and hope to the world that one day He will redeem all creation.

I want to close with an example, which I think most of us would resonate with. When we are shopping for a new flat, one typically goes to the site and you will find a show home over there. Right in the middle of the mess, they create this little bubble. An interior decorator comes and does the sofas and settees and carpets and lights and curtains – while the rest of the site is a total mess. But why do they do that? The reason is that this is a time machine. As you enter that show flat, it's giving you a visual demonstration of what your home can look like a few years down the road. And standing in that show home, if you look out of the windows, it's still a mess all around outside. But when you look in, you see what it will be a few years down the road.

So you and I, in the same way, as we look at our church, as we look at the church where God has placed us, we are a 'work in progress'. We are not there yet. We are not there fully. The church is filled with broken and damaged people and continue sadly to break and damage other people. Yet I believe God's will for us is that, as people enter the church, as they enter our community, it should be like that they are entering that time machine, like they are entering their show flat. They should get a sense of whatever it will be like one day. As they see our worship, as they participate, they should realize that we are a people who believe in the resurrection and we know that the best is yet to come.

Writing at the end of the 19th century, the hymn writer dealing with heresies that were swirling around at that time, wrote:

*Though with a scornful wonder, men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder; by heresies distressed.*

*Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.*

Perhaps, like that elder of Willow Creek, you and I would say, we're battered, weary, divided. But I pray as we go out that we would go out with the assurance that yes! We are also confident and hopeful and we are sure. We will believe that one day the Lord will answer the prayer that He taught us to pray. One day God's kingdom will come; His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And one day the resurrected Lord will return. Till then, He calls us to be His light, to be His witness and to be faithful. Demonstrations, first fruits of what He has in store for creation. May God bless His Word.