

**The Spirit Is Everywhere**  
**I Corinthians 15:12-20, 35-38, 42-50, 53-54; Jeremiah 17:5-8**

**Jeremiah 17:5-8**

<sup>5</sup>Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

<sup>6</sup>They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.

<sup>8</sup>They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Introduction

The church in Corinth had been founded by Paul, probably about five years earlier, and within that church dissension had arisen over various things. There was a complex social division, and there were some conflicting theologies—specifically, Christologies: what some were saying and teaching about Jesus.

So, Paul knows he is communicating with a Venn diagram of constituencies, with circles overlapping all over the place. In order to be heard, he has to navigate those complexities—each individual brings their own background story—and also speak the truth in love, with clarity.

We can't be sure of all the contours of the discussion that was going on in the Corinthian church, but it appears that some may have been OK with proclaiming the risen Christ, but stopped short of being able to affirm resurrection as a general belief. For some it may have been a question of how you interpret resurrection, which remains a sticking point for a lot of Christians two thousand years later.

For others, though, it may have been a question of whether they believed that Jesus had actually died. There was some gnostic stuff going around suggesting all kinds of things including that maybe Jesus never really was fully human, so he couldn't have been put to death; or, some thought, maybe he was fully human but God didn't actually let him die. Either way, the idea some had was that maybe Jesus was kind of whisked away at the last minute, and so had avoided death altogether.

To me, the whole conversation raises the question: What kind of world does Christianity believe this is?

One in which everything is saturated by the Holy Spirit, and therefore capable of being redeemed, no matter how difficult or daunting or hopeless it may seem? Or one which is alienated from God, a world in which the best thing you can hope for is to escape it?

### **I Corinthians 15:12-20, 35-38, 42-50, 53-54**

<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,  
how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

<sup>13</sup>If there is no resurrection of the dead,  
then Christ has not been raised;

<sup>14</sup>and if Christ has not been raised,  
then our proclamation has been in vain  
and your faith has been in vain.

<sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God,

because we testified of God that God raised Christ—  
whom God did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

<sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised,  
then Christ has not been raised.

<sup>17</sup>If Christ has not been raised,  
your faith is futile  
and you are still in your sins.

<sup>18</sup>Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.

<sup>19</sup>If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most  
to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup>But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those  
who have died...

<sup>35</sup>But somebody's going to ask, "How are the dead raised? With what  
kind of body do they come?"

<sup>36</sup>Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup>And as for  
what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed,  
perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. <sup>38</sup>But God gives it a body as  
God has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body...

<sup>42</sup>So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

What is sown is perishable,  
what is raised is imperishable.

<sup>43</sup>It is sown in dishonor,  
it is raised in glory.

It is sown in weakness,  
it is raised in power.

<sup>44</sup>It is sown a physical body,  
it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup>Thus it is written,

“The first man,<sup>i</sup> Adam, became a living being”;  
the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

<sup>46</sup>But it is not the spiritual that is first,  
but the physical, and then the spiritual.

<sup>47</sup>The first man was from the earth, a man of dust;  
the second man is from heaven.

<sup>48</sup>As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust;  
and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven.

<sup>49</sup>Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust,  
we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

<sup>50</sup>What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this:  
flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,  
nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...

<sup>53</sup>For this perishable body must put on imperishability,  
and this mortal body must put on immortality.

<sup>54</sup>When this perishable body puts on imperishability,  
and this mortal body puts on immortality,  
then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:  
“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Prayer of Adoration (with imagery from Job 38-39)

Creator God, Giver of life, Savior of the world,  
what kind of world *do* we live in?

Your domain is mystery,  
yet you are present in everything.

In gratitude and humility, we bow before you in praise:

You, who laid the foundation of the earth,  
    who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together  
    and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy;

you who enclosed the water that covers the earth  
    when it came from its mother,  
    who prescribed bounds for the endless water, and set bars and doors,  
    and said to the depthless ocean,  
        ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
        and here shall your proud waves be stopped;’

who commanded the morning since days began,  
    and taught the dawn its place;

who enters into the springs of the sea,  
    and walks in the recesses of the deep;  
who knows the gates of death  
    and has seen the gates of deep darkness;

who comprehends the expanse of the earth,  
    keeper of the storehouses of snow and hail,  
    distributor of light,  
    scatterer of the east wind over all the earth;

Father of the rain, begetter of the dewdrops;  
Mother of the ice and the frost of heaven;  
Master of the constellations,  
    who calls forth floods from the clouds, and gives orders to lightning;

who has put wisdom within us  
    and given understanding to the human mind;

Watcher over the prides of lions and the treacheries of ravens;  
Ranger of the tribes of mountain goats and mobs of deer;  
by whose wisdom the hawk soars,  
and spreads its wings toward the south;

at whose command the eagle mounts up  
and makes its nest on high.

Almighty God,  
Creator of the heavens and the earth,  
Giver of life, Savior of the world,  
You are present for us, but not always evident to us.

And so we praise you for your Son,  
the incarnation, the pure embodiment of your love for us,  
divinity and humanity in one person.

We proclaim that he is raised from the dead,  
and that in his risen-ness, we are assured again  
that this is *your* universe;  
that these are *your* lives, not ours;  
that the Holy Spirit not only travels where it may,  
but is already in every thing.

Help us, O God, we pray, to be attentive to  
your Spirit in all things,  
your presence in all matters,  
your resurrected son, and the promise of new life that he brings,  
in each situation and every circumstance.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Sermon

Sometimes, in a time of ugliness and divisiveness, where lies and deceitfulness are everywhere, it's hard to see much possibility beyond just surviving. As if that's the best that God had in store for any of us, or for humanity as a whole.

When the church in Corinth was on the verge of collapsing in on itself—a time of ugliness and divisiveness, where lies and obfuscation were rampant—

Paul reminded them that our message isn't just about this life, but it also isn't just about the next life.

And it's not just a matter of a vague notion of "spirituality."

It's about the reality of God's presence in everything—in the pain and darkness and apparent emptiness, as well as the light and bread and Word.

This universe, and the life each of us has been given, are indescribably precious to the One who created them.

How did you come into this world?

I was led in a spiritual exercise one time at a retreat, years ago—and have since led other people in this exercise—where all of us were invited to spread out around the retreat center or outside on the grounds, and find any object to focus on, no matter how sublime or mundane. A tree, a blade of grass, a wall outlet, a fire extinguisher, a water fountain, the spigot on the water fountain.

And the retreat leader said: contemplate that object for a while.

- Think about what it's there for, how it got there.
- Did it grow there, or were humans part of how it came to be? Who were they? What were *their* lives like?
- What is its function?

- What is it capable of?
- And, are there any connections that can be drawn from what that object is, or does, or is there for, and what you are, or do, or might be here for?

But you don't have to be involved in a reflective exercise to think about questions the resound through your God-given life.

Who brought you into the world, and who made sure you had what you needed?

What did your world look like when you were first coming into it—your home; your neighborhood; the trees, the roads, the landscape?

When you were small, what seemed important to you?

And as you grew, what did you think of the world you were being brought up into?

I was given a book of trivia for one of my birthdays around age 10, 11, 12. I used to just open it to random pages and read what was inside like it was an instruction manual for entering the world. I thought you were supposed to learn all these random data and useless nuggets—many from decades before that book was written—and that knowledge would be your ticket into the world that adults of several generations had been creating for you.

For example, I assumed there must be a target audience to whom I could demonstrate that I knew that the mid-20th century bandleader Xavier Cugat's theme song was "My Shawl."

I've still never heard that song, and I really had no idea who Xavier Cugat was, but for some reason I deduced that that was one of 10,000 secret passwords that would grant you entry into the world that people my age and younger were being born into.

I always thought there would be some occasion where I could help a younger person along by saying, “You know, in case anybody ever asks you what Xavier Cugat’s theme song is, it’s ‘My Shawl.’”

For 40 years I’ve been stuck with this useless piece of information, until just now when I can finally tell you that Xavier Cugat’s theme song was called “My Shawl.”

It was years before I made the leap of imagination to realize that there wouldn’t always be a generation around who avidly kept up with the musical stylings of Xavier Cugat.

And that was the thing: I assumed that the world I was growing up into was more or less static. And as I grew up I realized that the things and the ideas and the names and all the trivia that were known and celebrated by one generation went with them.

We live in the time that God gives us on the earth. God surrounds us with the people who raise and nurture us, and we grow up in a time and circumstance and culture in which we are given opportunities to speak love and beauty and truth regardless of whether that’s the nature of the environment.

We each have our story, and it’s full of loveliness and heartaches and hope and loneliness and longing for some connection to someone else or to something that’s out there. Maybe we all long to get back to our Creator.

But one way or another we make our way in a world in which God is present in everything, a world blessed by Jesus of Galilee and redeemed by the Christ who died and was raised again for us all.

Kenda Creasy Dean wrote, “For Christians, faith means cleaving to the person, the God-man, of Jesus Christ, joining a pilgrim journey with other lovers and following him into the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

She said, “Faith can topple towers or governments, it can manipulate millions or set millions free, it can cause death or overcome death. The church, at various times, has been on every side of the passion equation, but when we get it right Christian discipleship means following a God who loved us enough to die for us, and who calls us to love others just as deeply.”<sup>iii</sup>

According to Matthew, when Jesus was crucified, after somebody ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered it up to him to drink, Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

But it was recently pointed out to me that the same words in the Greek that are translated “he breathed his last” could just as accurately be translated, “he released the Spirit.”

The Spirit is everywhere. Even in the darkness and horror and shamefulness, God is still the God of the who universe and everything in it; Jesus is still the Lord of your life and my life and all life, imbuing all things with the Holy Spirit.

We have testified that God raised Jesus from the dead, and we have not misrepresented God.

And like the millions who have come before us,  
all with their own stories in their own time,  
living and working and singing and praying  
in the world in which they found themselves,

we are each and all like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.

It doesn't have to fear when the heat comes,  
and its leaves stay green;  
in the year of drought, it doesn't get too anxious,  
and it never, ever stops bearing fruit.

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<sup>i</sup> I was tempted to replace “man” with a gender-neutral term such as “person” or “one,” but that was under the false assumption that Paul had been using the term *anthropos*. In fact, each of Paul’s uses of “man” in this section is *aner*, which is literally an adult male human. While in most other contexts I would still be inclined to make the change, I decided to allow myself the profound discomfort of sticking with the literal translation. Of course, in his time, Paul would have been thinking in terms of two adult, male, human figures, Adam and Jesus.

<sup>ii</sup> Kenda Dean, *Almost Christian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. I regret that the page numbers for this eminently quotable text have escaped my notes and my copy is not at hand as I compile this manuscript.

<sup>iii</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*.