

Scripture Readings for July 10th, 2022

1 Thessalonians 4:13-16¹

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

1 Corinthians 15:16-22

¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Mark 12:18-27

¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹ "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

²⁴ Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

¹ See also Philippians 3:20 – 4:1.

Sermon: “We Look Forward to the Future”

We *all* like to be optimistic about the future; after all, being persistently pessimistic can lead to depression and apathy. Nevertheless, sometimes it’s hard to identify *reliable* grounds for optimism. Even so, we persist because we don’t want to *invent* a reason for our hope as that would be delusional. The foundation for our optimism needs to be based on something we consider to be trustworthy, and various possibilities come to mind, such as personal wealth, human ingenuity, science,² and historical evidence.

Many people put their confidence in humanity, in education and research, and in an underlying belief in social “progress.” The saying “necessity is the mother of invention” is traced back to Plato and places humankind in the driving seat to fix things.³ And it’s true, we *are* very inventive; science, technology, and engineering have transformed our way of life from that of our grandparents. We shouldn’t belittle these remarkable intellectual and practical achievements! Most people don’t like visiting a dentist but imagine what that experience would have been like a century ago! Nevertheless, take a good look at the state of our world. We struggle to work together effectively and instead we fight militarily and economically. In some sense, collective selfishness and greed is like a *power* that no person, country, or global institution can control, and so we become dominated by them. Consequently, humankind struggles to address the pressing problems of climate change, pollution, population increase, not to mention a range of persistent social problems including racism, wealth disparity, and healthcare. The Enlightenment optimism of the late 1800s, fueled in part by the vision of *the inevitability of progress*,⁴ collapsed with the brutal devastation of World War I. Even so, self belief in humankind’s capabilities still survives and even thrives in some quarters; after all, hope in humanity is all that remains for those who don’t believe in a God who’s actively involved in history.

And this brings me to the final affirmation of the Nicene Creed, namely: “*We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*” The Creed begins with *creation* and ends with the *expectation*⁵ of *life in the presence of our Creator*. The Christian belief is that God - Father, Son, and

² We all know that astronomers tell us that the universe began with a Big Bang 14 billion years ago. But what do they say about the future? There’s a lot we don’t know and one of the current mysteries is Dark Energy, and this seems to be causing the expansion of the universe to *accelerate*. Given our current state of knowledge, the universe is going to expand forever becoming more and more tenuous and, in the process, become colder and colder, darker and darker, and the universe will end up in a deep freeze in 200 billion years time. Never mind, long before then, in about 4½ billion years our sun will die and, in the process, expand in size to engulf our planet. But long before that, in a 100 million years or so, the sun will temporarily heat up, boil off our oceans and eliminate our atmosphere. This is not very encouraging and, worse still, there is absolutely nothing we can do about this ultimate fate for our planet. There’s no grounds for optimism there! But the time scales involved won’t worry you or me.

³ Plato famously wrote “our need will be the real creator.” (However, mystery-writer Agatha Christie once wrote, “Invention isn’t born of necessity but arises directly from idleness, or perhaps even laziness,” to save oneself trouble!)

⁴ Biological evolution was regarded, I suggest somewhat uncritically, as a positive change or as “progress.” This was then absorbed within the Enlightenment culture to embrace intellectual and social progress or the perfectibility of the human race.

⁵ The word “look” is really “look forward” or “expect.”

Spirit - were all involved in creating *all that is*, and that creation happened *for a reason*. The Creed doesn't say what that purpose is, but theologians speak of the Trinity's creative acts as an *overflowing of divine love*. The Creed also states that the incarnation, God becoming human in the person of Jesus, was for *our* benefit, for *our rescue*, for we are ultimately unable to save ourselves. We are told that even Christ's crucifixion was for "our sake."⁶ The Creed goes on to say, the risen and ascended Jesus "*will come again* in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom *will have no end*." In light of that proclamation, the Creed boldly ends, "We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."⁷

Such confidence can *only* be based on the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus.⁸ That's the *foundation* for our looking forward to our ultimate future. What God has begun, God will complete, and the pivotal person in history is Jesus the Messiah. Having said that, the Creed *doesn't* spell out what that future life will be like, and I think that was wise. The reason being that the New Testament doesn't paint a *consistent* picture of life in the world to come. Rather than simply acknowledging that fact, this variation has resulted in Christians emphasizing one passage over another.⁹ For example, too many focus on the visionary book of Revelation and elevates this one New Testament witness at the expense of all others.¹⁰ Not only that, too many Christians literalize the metaphorical, apocalyptic language of Revelation itself, reducing its powerful prophetic protest into a supposed cosmic timetable of end-time events. We are meant to take comfort from the book of Revelation, not least because it paints a vivid picture of God at work in history. But that truth is revealed in the rest of the Bible too. For example, Peter's sample sermons in the book of Acts stress *the resurrection of Jesus* along with his proclamation of Jesus as being the Messiah.¹¹ Paul's sermons do the same thing.¹² We might think that was a poor strategy, thinking that they should have preached on loving our neighbor and loving God. Important though those two summary commandments are, the apostles instead focused on the radical good news of the resurrection. That message was unpopular among the *Jewish* elite resulting in Peter and John being brought in front of the influential High Priest Caiaphas,¹³ the one who interrogated Jesus and helped manipulate Pilate to get Jesus crucified.¹⁴ When Paul was preaching in Athens, the cultural center of *Greek* philosophy, all was going well until he mentioned the resurrection, at which point many

⁶ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Believe-in-Jesus-Part-2.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/We-Believe-in-Jesus-Part-1.pdf> .

⁷ See [4].

⁸ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Follow-the-Evidence.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Risen-Jesus-Encounters-Thomas.pdf> ;

⁹ This results in a so-called "canon within a canon," which is always suspect and dangerous.

¹⁰ For example, see 2 Macc 7: 9; John 5:25–29; Matt 25; 2 Tim 2:11–13; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Be-Prepared.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Generous-Master-and-the-Fearful-Servant.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-King-is-Coming.pdf> .

¹¹ See Acts 2:32; 3:14-15; 4:2, 33.

¹² See Acts 17:18, 32; 23:6; 24:15, 21; 26:23.

¹³ Acts 4:5-6. Caiaphas may have been sympathetic of the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

¹⁴ See John 18:13; Matt 26:57-67; Mark 14:53-65.

“sneered” at him and walked away.¹⁵ In one of Paul’s earliest letters, he comforts those who are suffering with these words: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”¹⁶ Elsewhere Paul adds, “We are citizens of heaven and we’re eagerly waiting for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is going to come from there. He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own.”¹⁷ Many today find this too weird to believe, yet the author of Hebrews regards the “resurrection of the dead” as Christianity 101.¹⁸ Their confidence lay in their experience of the risen Christ.

What about Jesus, did *he* believe in the resurrection of those faithful to God at the end of time? Mark relates an incident, one that’s retold in Matthew and Luke,¹⁹ where Jesus is being questioned by some Sadducees. Remember, the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the righteous at the judgment day. Why? Because it’s not explicitly mentioned in the first 5 books of the Old Testament, which were attributed to Moses himself. Their question to Jesus only makes sense if they *knew* that Jesus, like the pharisees, believed in the final resurrection. As we heard, they present a farcical situation that was meant to reveal the absurdity of the belief. They quote Moses who said: “If a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.”²⁰ This was intended to protect the widow and provide an indirect inheritance for her in her old age. The Sadducees present seven brothers who each in turn marry the woman and die leaving her with no heir. Remember *it’s a story!* On one level it seems like terrible abuse of the poor woman whose only mercy is to die herself at the end, and we wonder if she should have died sooner! Alternatively, it seems like she’s a black widow and the men all get what they deserve! But this parody is not the point of the story. The Sadducees want Jesus to tell them whose wife she will be at the resurrection. Jesus responds, “You are *wrong* because *you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.*” Jesus boldly challenges the authority of these elite religious experts and deems them incompetent! He claims they *don’t* know their Bible and more to the point, they *belittle* the power of God. Luke gives the fullest and clearest explanation: Jesus said, “Those who belong *to this age* marry and are given in marriage; but *those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead* neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they *cannot* die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being *children of the resurrection.*”²¹ This raises *all kinds* of questions that I will deliberately avoid today! The key point is that *Jesus proclaimed the resurrection of the dead to those*

¹⁵ Acts 17:32. See also 1 Cor 1: 22-23; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Scandal-of-the-Cross.pdf> .

¹⁶ 1 Thess 4:13-14.

¹⁷ Phil 3:20-21

¹⁸ See Heb 6:1-2.

¹⁹ See Mark 12:18-27; Matt 22:23-33; Luke 20: 27-38.

²⁰ See Deut 25:5-10 (see also Ruth 4:1-12).

²¹ See Luke 20:34-36. The notion of the present age and the age to come is both Jewish and Christian. Resurrection life will be both continuous and discontinuous with our present life/bodies (in not clearly specified ways).

who are worthy. And this can *only* happen through the *creative power* of the *life-giving God*,²² something that the apostles witnessed first-hand in the shocking resurrection of Jesus. Don't forget that no one doubted Jesus was *worthy* of resurrection; what was totally unexpected was that he was resurrected at *that* point in time – rather than at the end of history. And that's also what fired up the sermons of Peter and Paul!

Now I totally agree with critics who point out that the Gospel accounts don't present a uniform picture of the resurrection of Jesus. But perhaps that's no bad thing because if they did, we might think the fix was in to get their "stories" straight. The differences in their descriptions of this marvelous but mysterious event is, I believe, part of their authenticity. So, we don't have precise details about the manner of Christ's resurrection and ascension, and in a similar way we don't know *how* God will raise the righteous dead to life with God.²³ Nevertheless, *if* God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead, *then* God has the ability to raise all the righteous from the dead. And that's precisely Paul's logic to those in the wisdom-loving Greek city of Corinth. His argument is presented the other way around: "If the dead are not raised, then the Messiah was not raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is pointless. And those who trusted in Jesus and have already died are actually lost forever. And if only for this present life we have put our hope in Christ, then we are the most pitiable members of the human race. But that's not in fact the case," says Paul, "The Messiah *has indeed* been raised from the dead and is the first of a great harvest of all who have died."²⁴ This, then, is the grounds of our optimism for the future in the face any and all contradictory evidence. And even when we struggle with our doubts over the truth of the resurrection, let's not forget the evidence of God's *creation* lies all around us. Let's not be like the Sadducees and underestimate the power of God. In saying "*we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come*," we are proclaiming that God *can* bring life out of death, just as God *brought forth* living beings out of inanimate matter in the creation.²⁵

Many today half-agree with the secular optimism born out of human effort and are embarrassed by the Creed's bold statement based on God's *creative* power. And many contemporary Christians are also confused over a spectrum of theological positions, most of which are not particularly convincing or attractive. At one end of the spectrum are those who insist the New Testament's vision of the future is exclusive, fiery, and fearful for those who don't think as they do. At the opposite extreme are those who translate all Christian expectations of God *acting* within history into a "this-worldly" hope for better social, economic, and political structures through the active participation of the righteous. Please don't misunderstand me; such endeavors to work for social justice and peace, along with modelling

²² The issue of the Sadducees not knowing their Scriptures is addressed in Mark 12:26-27: "Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

²³ Which, we are told in Rev 21:1-5, will also involve a new heaven and a new earth.

²⁴ 1 Cor 15:16-20.

²⁵ Moreover, God didn't *just* create the world only to then disappear from view and let it run its course, rather God is *still* engaged with history (e.g. the incarnation, Pentecost) and God is (still) in the saving and reconciling business. God's goal is to reconcile *all things* (not just humans) under Jesus the Messiah (see Col 1:19-20; 2 Cor 5:18-19; Rom 5:10-11).

integrity and compassion, are genuine kingdom of God values and *are* to be encouraged. Such things are not incompatible with the Christians ultimate hope of life with God. But let's *partner with* God in this process, rather than exclude God altogether. Many who recite the creed then have little *expectation* of God's saving and reconciling goal for *all of creation*.²⁶ And quite a few Christians simply identify future life with the Greek idea of the "immortality of the soul" and, like the Sadducees, belittle the creative power of God. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, "Survival is *not* salvation, and persistence in the immortality of the soul is *not* glorification!"

Instead, if we have *confidence* in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, *that* will inevitably shape the way we live our life as Christians in the here and now. For example, we need not live in fear but in hope since the creator God has re-creation and regeneration in mind.²⁷ Moreover, we're *not* simply following a self-help manual, rather we live as those aware that God's transforming work in the world is not yet finished. The Christian foundation for our optimism is therefore a reliable faith that *each moment* is shaped by the One who calls into life that which is not, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who can also raise our mortal bodies into fellowship with the living God. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁶ At best they look for some version of the profoundly *individualistic* "four things," namely: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Three of those things create intense fear and even the hope that's connected with "heaven" is somewhat vague.

²⁷ Paul concludes his long chapter on this topic to the Corinthian church by quoting the prophets Isaiah and Hosea: "Death," he says, "has been swallowed up in victory. Death, where's your victory gone? Death, where's your sting gone? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor 15:54b-55, 57, citing Isa 25:8 and Hos 13:14.)