

The Correct Foundation

I Samuel 8:4-11;16-20

II Corinthians 4:13-5:1

“If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you do it, too?” My father actually asked me that—though I cannot remember what risky business made him do it. Possibly something to do with my bike and a jumping ramp. We can imagine God asking this of the children of Israel. In I Samuel the people have long clamored for a king. Though the text does not give them credit for it, they actually have a valid reason. Their loose confederation of tribes cannot match their opponents' kings in the ruthless efficiency with which they wage war. The Israelites have endured a losing streak. They want a king because they hope he would better protect them. But to employ another cliché, be careful what you ask for, because you might just get it.

Samuel warns them that a king will take their sons and daughters, their best animals, their basic freedoms. Besides, they already **have** the king of kings, the Lord God Almighty, who has promised to protect them if they will but trust the deal. Still, the people dig in their heels. They demand a king. And this time God relents. In essence he tells Samuel to tell them, “Fine, you win—**if** you call what's about to happen to you winning. All those warnings I gave you will come true.” As an aside, the name of the first Israelite king, Saul, comes from a Hebrew root that also yields the verb, “to beg”. The people begged, and they got what they asked for. They insisted on climbing on their bikes and riding straight over a cliff.

All too often we try to build our lives on foundations we know to be crumbling. Many of us know of marriages that probably never should have happened because, well, why? Momentum? Fear of never finding somebody better suited? Because somebody's parents had already made a bunch of non-refundable down payments for the reception, the DJ, the honeymoon? A surprisingly high number of divinity students enter seminary because they do not know what else to do. These days, at least in mainline churches like ours, the majority of them have already had one, or two, or more careers. They are searching for themselves. And while we mandate counseling to try to prevent people from wandering through seminary while incurring more debt, an appreciable number slip through and become miserable in ministry.

Please understand, I do not mean to blame or to criticize these married folks or these pastors. I feel a great deal of sympathy for them. I praise God that 20 year-old me (you could have found me in the dictionary under "clueless, see overconfident") somehow heard a real calling from God that has sustained me through the challenges of ministry. I simply want to illustrate how building lives on improper foundations can look. In fact, I care enough about this, and the people caught up in it, that I want to preach about it.

The Apostle Paul clearly asked himself what had he done by getting into the evangelism business. We know because of the frequency with which he wrote about his travails. Shipwreck, persecution, hunger, endless disputes with his fellow Jews, arrest, and scholars think referenced in our passage from II Corinthians, deadly

disease: they all happened to Paul multiple times. Why did he get himself into this? His answer appears in 8:16: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.” We need to explain one thing Paul does not mean. Contrary to claims made by the second century Gnostic Christians to the Puritans to certain very restrictive modern denominations, the Apostle Paul did **not** believe the body is sinful and the soul holy. In fact, such a thought was impossible for him. Paul the Pharisee knew that body and soul, we are sinners redeemed by Christ. He means that while this disease has wasted away his body, his confidence in God has actually grown. He may have experienced affliction but it only prepared him for “an eternal weight of glory”. His confidence empowers him to see the glorious, eternal “unseen things”. But where does Paul find such confidence?

Our passage opens with the answer. “Since we have the same spirit of faith,” Paul writes, “as he who wrote, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we too believe, and so we speak.” He quotes here from Psalm 116, in which the author gives thanks to God for healing from—wait for it—a terrible disease. These men feared for their lives. They write of praying for God to heal them but worrying it might not happen. They had to wait for the consummation of their afflictions **in faith**. Once they recovered their gratitude compelled them to testify to God's power and love. (“We too believe, and so we speak.”) But Paul took one more step. Unless we take it, we lose a critical piece of the Christian faith, a piece that some Christians struggle to hang onto.

Paul continues, “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we

have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Like many Pharisees, Paul had a trade with which he was meant to support himself. His trade was working with canvas. It should not surprise us that a canvas worker would employ the image of a tent to illustrate his point, that he believes in the personal resurrection not only of Jesus of Nazareth, but also of all those who are “in Christ”. The “earthly tent” is our present person, body and soul. The eternal home in the heavens is the life Paul is convinced believers will receive when they die to this world. While our earthly tents remain pitched, we wait with confidence that Jesus has prepared a home for us, with him, forever, after we die.

Whatever, whenever, however it looks, Paul believes in his own resurrection. Do we? The Gallup Organization has taken an annual poll on religion in America since 1948. One question that has appeared about every fifteen years is, “Do you believe in life after death?” The earliest report on this question came from June of 1955. Back then 85% of Americans polled said they did believe in life after death. The most recent report on this question came from May of 2011. How many Americans polled then would you guess said they believed in life after death? 85%. This result surprised me. The percentages of Americans attending churches, who believe in a god, who pray daily have all declined over these same years. Yet people retain faith in the afterlife.

Of course, people likely have widely differing ideas about what that afterlife would be like. We Presbyterians confess our faith that scripture is the inspired Word of God, that while we are not to try to take it literally, nevertheless with the Holy Spirit's

guidance we are to search it diligently for God's meaning and purposes. Nowhere in his New Testament writings does Paul describe his vision of heaven, or of what form our bodies and souls might take in whatever resurrection life we receive.

Yet Paul does repeatedly state that his faith in Jesus Christ, and him crucified and resurrected, gives him confidence that those who share that faith will live eternally with Christ. Do we believe that? Do we believe we have a home in heaven, in which we will dwell eternally in the presence of Jesus? This is not a rhetorical question. It is an existential question. It cuts to the core of our beings, and of being itself.

In addition to the testimony of scripture, we do have other testimonies to life after death. People who have had near-death report what happened with a certain consistency. In fact, some of their comments have entered our vernacular. "Go to the light," is probably the best known of these. These folks also commonly report having somehow "seen" loved ones, often reaching out toward them. They report sensing an overwhelming presence, usually described as loving, enveloping them.

These testimonies are not proof. They can, however, serve as building blocks in a solid foundation for our faith. They help form the correct foundation for us, one that reassures us not only of life after death, but of meaning and purpose in this life. Build on this foundation and you will begin to find answers even for the hardest existential questions. Have faith in the resurrection.