

Trusting the God Who Raises the Dead

By Brad Allison on 3/27/2005

Scripture Reference *2 Corinthians 1:3-11*

There is a common pattern in the way people come to understand and appreciate the resurrection of Jesus. The pattern involves two steps: skepticism to acceptance and then acceptance to appreciation. For example, Jesus' first disciples were skeptical at first. Even though Jesus had told them during his life that he would be raised from the dead in three days, none of them were waiting at the tomb on day 3 to see if it would happen. And when it did happen, Thomas' reaction was typical of them all. "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (John 20:25). But he very quickly did come to accept the resurrection of Jesus when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him face to face. That's the first step—skepticism leading to acceptance.

But there's a second step too—from acceptance to an appreciation of the significance of Jesus' resurrection. While the first step can happen quickly, the second takes a long time. Hasn't that been your experience? I have accepted for as long as I can remember that Jesus really was raised from the dead. But through the years my grasp of its significance has grown. For example, it has occurred to me that my very job is based on the resurrection of Jesus. My job is to speak on behalf of a God I have never seen. How do I know I'm giving people truth instead of just telling them something that will make them feel better? How do I even know that there is such a thing as truth? Because I believe that Jesus really has been raised from the dead, and that changes everything. During his lifetime, Jesus said that he would be raised from the dead, and it happened just as he said it would. No one but God could do that or know that. If Jesus was right about that, then he was right about everything. Jesus really is God's Son, for he is God himself.

What I want to talk about this morning is not the move from skepticism to acceptance of Jesus' resurrection, but the move from acceptance to appreciation of the significance of Jesus' resurrection. I want to talk about the kind of "Aha!" moment when it hits us that if Jesus is raised from the dead, everything changes. Such moments ought to occur throughout our lives. I have chosen this passage in 2 Corinthians because in it Paul reports of just such an "Aha!" moment he experienced. He had long ago accepted the resurrection of Jesus and had comprehended much of its significance. But he reports how he came to an even deeper appreciation of it when he experienced some difficulties in Asia. He doesn't tell the readers the precise nature of his difficulties, probably because his original readers in Corinth knew what he was talking about. But they didn't know how severe his trial had been, so Paul tells them that it was so severe that he thought he was going to die. Perhaps it was some form of persecution, or maybe a shipwreck. Whatever it was, Paul learned through it not to rely on himself, but on the God who raises the dead. His "Aha!" moment was learning that the resurrection of Jesus can help us learn to trust God. So let's look at this a little more carefully this morning, by considering the main two points of verse 9: self-reliance and God-reliance.

I. The Ruin of Self-Trust

Renouncing self-trust and learning instead to trust in God always go together. They are like two sides of the same coin. You will never learn to renounce self-trust until you come to see that God is able to be trusted, and you will never be able to trust God until you renounce self-trust. To say the same thing in a different way, the opposite of trusting God is not doubting God, but trusting self. If you are having trouble trusting and believing God, your problem is not the presence of doubt, but the presence of too much self-reliance. Paul says

here that the resurrection of Jesus is the key both to renouncing self-trust and learning to trust God. It's foolish to trust in ourselves because we have a God who can do far more than we can do. He can raise the dead. Paul writes here of a time when he came to a deeper appreciation of this due to some significant suffering in his life. I notice three truths about this self-trust.

I notice first that even mature Christians like Paul still have much to learn about renouncing self-trust. Here is an enemy not easily defeated, one we will be fighting for the rest of our lives. Paul's experience of learning through suffering not to trust in himself occurred after he wrote 1 Corinthians. Here was a man mature enough to write 1 Corinthians 13, which contains the great love chapter of the Bible, yet was still learning not to trust in himself. Self-trust is a formidable enemy indeed.

Illustration: A few years ago, *USA Today* included an article about a plan from the Department of Transportation to research an Automated Highway System. This system would purportedly relieve traffic woes with "super cruise control" in heavily congested cities. The road would interact with the car in such a way that control would be completely removed from the driver and transferred to the computers in the car and the road. Control would be returned to drivers at their specified exit. Researchers and government officials claim they have the technological capability to address any potential problem. But one challenge they have yet to address. Says Mike Doble, Buick's technology manager, "The only thing we can't do yet is get people to comfortably trust the system. It's not a technology issue. Would you drive, closely spaced, at high speeds, through San Diego?"

A second truth concerning self-reliance is that, according to the Bible, it is a central feature of evil. There is a great need in our day to return to the biblical view of evil. Our modern view, influenced by the self-esteem movement, is that everyone is basically good, with just a few exceptions. These few exceptions are those guilty of monstrous evil, people like Hitler and mass murderers. That is not the biblical view of evil. The Bible's view is reflected in a verse like Ezekiel 33:13 - "Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die." Evil stems from trusting in ourselves, especially in our own righteousness. Such self-trust says, "I don't need God because I can do it myself." Evil is not something characteristic of just a few really bad people, but something within all of us, even a mature missionary like Paul. The problem is that it is so common that we have a hard time seeing it. We tend to reason along the lines that I read about in the paper out of the Richard Scrushy trial. One of the witnesses against him said that he was told by Mr. Scrushy that it was okay to falsify the company's financial reports because "Everyone does it." Here's the application. Can you accept the fact that you may have a problem with self-dependency, and that it is a big problem rather than a small one?

The third point I want to make about self-trust concerns one of its common, but hard to see components. It is the desire to be special apart from God. In order to see this point, we need to understand the context of this book of 2 Corinthians. Paul is writing this letter because his leadership had been called into question by a group of leaders who had moved into the Corinthian church. They were trying to make the case that Paul's leadership wasn't up to standard because he just wasn't heroic enough. Things always seemed to go wrong for him. He had been beaten on numerous occasions, and the results showed on his body. He had spent way too much time in jail. On top of all that, his speaking style wasn't at all flashy. What the Corinthians expected was someone like Mel Gibson, and what they got was someone like Gomer Pyle. They wanted strength in their leaders—someone like Hercules—and what they got was weakness—someone more like Charlie Brown.

Illustration: In a Peanuts comic strip, there was a conversation between Lucy and Charlie Brown. Lucy said that life is like a deck chair. Some place it so they can see where they are going; some place it so they can see where they have been; and some place it so they can see where they are at present. Charlie Brown's reply: "I can't even get mine unfolded."

So why does Paul begin this letter in which he is defending his leadership by relating to them another "Charlie Brown" incident from his life? Why doesn't he say instead, "Well, it may be true that there have been some setbacks in my ministry, but let me set the record straight by pointing out some of the good things that have happened"? Because he wanted to drive this point home that the Corinthians' desire for strength was really just an expression of self-trust. Here's the application. Your desire to be special will destroy your soul, because it is more about self-trust than about trusting in God. Do you know what I mean by a desire to be special? It is the self-image we create for ourselves that sees our worth based on something we are or something we accomplish. It says, "I know I am special because I have a good job, an attractive face, a good sense of humor, a clean house, an education from a good college, a really cool car." What makes us special has nothing to do with us, and everything to do with God. That brings us to our next point.

II. The Glory of Trusting in God

If trusting in ourselves lies at the heart of evil, then trusting in God lies at the heart of true goodness. Note here that trusting God was more important to God than Paul's comfort. God led Paul to a place of great suffering in order that Paul might be blessed with a greater trust in God. It was a place of such severe suffering that Paul realized he had no ability to extricate himself. Then he remembered the resurrection of Jesus. He had a God who raised the dead, and a God who can do that can do anything.

The reality for most of us is the same as it was for Paul. We learn to trust God when things are so bad that trying to find the solution in our own effort will obviously not work, and then we remember that our God raises the dead. This is the sweet spot in which our trust in God develops. Things are so bad that we get desperate. Just before we despair, we have an "Aha!" moment in which we remember Jesus' resurrection. "Oh, that's right," we say, "my problems may be so bad that I have no solution, but God raises the dead." You may have tried everything you know to rescue your troubled marriage, and nothing has yet worked. In desperation you say, "God, there is no hope for this marriage unless you step in and raise this dead marriage."

Let me say the same thing differently. If you are to learn to trust God, you have to come to the place of believing two things about your problems. First, they are beyond your ability. Second, they are not unique. Think of it like this. As you travel the road of faith, there are two ditches to avoid. On one side of the road is the ditch of thinking that your problems are manageable. If you can just impose some discipline on your life, or learn the secret of managing this problem, then all will be well. Such an attitude is an evidence of self-trust and pride, and it will keep you from trusting God and from a real solution. But there's another ditch on the other side of the road, the ditch of making too much of your problems, of thinking they are so big that they are unique. You imagine that no one in the history of the world has ever faced such huge problems as you. This is one of the devil's big lies. He wants you to think that your problems are such that they lie outside Jesus' ability to help you. Jesus can help others, but not you, you think. This ditch, too, keeps you from Jesus.

Illustration: We are to move through life like a blind skier. I understand that it is possible for blind people to go snow skiing. The way it works is that each skier is accompanied by a

person of sight who directs them at every turn. Imagine yourself a blind skier, completely dependent on your guide. The problem with many of us is that we imagine we can see, when in fact we are blind. As long as you think you can see, you will not be dependent enough on your guide. But if you know yourself to be blind, your ears will listen for every word from your guide, to be followed by instant obedience to that word. Just as the blind skier learns not to rely on his own sight, but on that of his guide, so we must learn not to trust ourselves but the God who raises the dead.

CONCLUSION:

As we prepare to take communion today, I would like to leave you with three applications. First, Paul's application of this lies in the area of prayer. In a verse that provides the scriptural foundation for recruiting lots of people to pray for you, Paul says, "You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many" (v. 11). If we have learned not to rely on ourselves, but on the God who raises the dead, then we will pray and we will recruit others to pray as well.

Second, would you consider the possibility that you have a problem with self-trust? The apostle Paul, this mature missionary, had such a problem. Perhaps you do as well. Would you ask God to show you any self-trust in your life, and then repent of it? And then the third application is to remember the resurrection. You have a God who raises the dead. Nothing is impossible for him. Look to him in faith instead of to yourself.

Do you remember E. M. Bounds story in his book on prayer?

A dear friend of mine who was quite a lover of the chase, told me the following story: "Rising early one morning," he said, "I heard the baying of a score of deer hounds in pursuit of their quarry. Looking away to a broad, open field in front of me, I saw a young fawn making its way across, and giving signs, moreover, that its race was well-nigh run. Reaching the rails of the enclosure, it leaped over and crouched within ten feet from where I stood. A moment later two of the hounds came over, when the fawn ran in my direction and pushed its head between my legs. I lifted the little thing to my breast, and, swinging round and round, fought off the dogs. I felt, just then, that all the dogs in the West could not, and should not capture that fawn after its weakness had appealed to my strength." So is it, when human helplessness appeals to Almighty God.