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February 1st: Jeremiah 31 & 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

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Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah. The way of love.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 31. At that time declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel. Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines, and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria.

The planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim. Arise and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.

For thus says the Lord, sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations. Proclaim, give praise and say, O Lord save your people, the remnant of Israel. Behold I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth.

Among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor together. A great company they shall return here, with weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back. I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble.

For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away. Say, He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.

For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd. Their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more.

Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord.

Thus says the Lord. A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children.

She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says the Lord. Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord.

And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord. And your children shall come back to their own country.

I have heard Ephraim grieving. You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf. Bring me back, that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God.

For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I struck my thigh. I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth. Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still.

Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord. Set up road markers for yourself.

Make yourself guideposts. Consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities.

How long will you waver, O faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth. A woman encircles a man. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah, and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes. The Lord bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill. And Judah and all its cities shall dwell there together, and the farmers, and those who wander with their flocks.

For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish. At this I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast.

And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity.

Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar. The Lord of hosts is his name.

If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord, from the tower of Hananel to the corner gate, and the measuring line shall go out

farther, straight to the hill Gerab, and shall then turn to Goa.

The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown any more forever. Jeremiah chapter 31 is arguably the most famous part of the entire book, with its promise of the new covenant in verses 31-34.

The words of this prophecy are taken up in the New Testament, where they are related to the new situation established through the work of Christ. However, in Christians' use of the words of this prophecy, the context in which they were originally delivered, and the initial horizon to which they look, can easily be forgotten. The chapter opens with what is called the covenant formula, the statement that the Lord will be his people's God, and that they will be his people.

In the context here it is an assurance of restoration of the covenant bond. God will once again claim the people as his own, all of the clans of Israel, restoring them to his land and being present in their midst once more. At a number of points in the book of Jeremiah, the deliverance expected after exile is related to the earlier deliverance of the Exodus.

Here the current situation of the people is described in language purposefully redolent of that earlier experience of deliverance from a foreign land. They had escaped the sword of Egypt and found grace in the wilderness. We might think here of the Lord's forgiveness of the people in chapters 32-34 of the book of Exodus, after the sin with the golden calf, and then they were brought into rest in the promised land.

A similar pattern of events will happen again. The people who have survived the sword of the Assyrians and the Babylonians find grace in the land of their exile, and they will be brought back into rest in the land. Just as the Lord heard the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt, so he has heard the cries of his people in exile.

He assures the people of his steadfast everlasting love for them. He may have judged and punished them on account of their sin, but he will bring them back to himself, restore them in his land, and renew his fellowship with them once more. Once again the programmatic language of building and planting is used.

The Lord will build them, and they will assuredly be built up. They will go out with tambourines and dancing, just as Miriam and the women of Israel celebrated with tambourines and dancing after the Lord's defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Along with the Lord's building, there will be planting.

They will plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria, the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. They will have the freedom and the security necessary to engage in

agriculture. Planters will plant, and they will enjoy the fruit.

And the nation will be joined together, southern and northern kingdom reunited in the true worship of God. Mount Ephraim, a promontory for watchmen in the southern mountains of Ephraim, would be a place for summoning people to pilgrimage to Zion. The words of this passage chiefly seem to be addressed to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, who were displaced and deported by the Assyrians, while other foreign peoples were placed in their land.

The reference to the virgin Israel, to Samaria, to the hill country of Ephraim, all seem to have reference to the northern kingdom more particularly. In the context of the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah, the reference of these words would naturally expand to include the Judahites too, but it seems that they were first delivered to a context of Israelite captivity, rather than Judahite. The hope that emerges is of a unified restoration to the land.

Judah and Israel brought back together and made one nation under their shepherd David. In the verses that follow, the Lord, who scattered Israel, will gather him as a shepherd. He will lead them back from the north country, bringing them on a straight path, near water where they can drink.

It won't just be the strong, it will be the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labour, the weak and vulnerable of the people, along with everyone else. With weeping, presumably in repentance and pleas for mercy from the Lord, the Lord will gather them back, he will establish them once more, and their mourning will be turned into rejoicing and song. The land, which was becoming barren as a result of their sin prior to the exile, will now be restored to fruitfulness and life.

There will be an abundance of grain and wine and oil. The flocks and the herds will multiply. Ultimately, the source of all this goodness will be the Lord himself.

He is the giver of all good gifts, and his loving favour is the greatest gift of all. Behind and within all of these gifts is his goodness. In the narrative of the book of Genesis, the story of Rachel is often a tragic one.

Her sister Leah is fruitful while she is barren. While she does end up bearing two children, later on she is cursed by her husband unwittingly as a result of her taking the teraphim of her father Laban. Her son Joseph is hated and betrayed by his brothers and sold into the land of Egypt.

On the way to Bethlehem she dies giving birth to his brother Benjamin. Ramah was associated by some with the place of her death and her voice as that of the bereaved mother in the borderlands of the tribal lands of her sons Ephraim and Benjamin. Cries out in the desperation of another bereavement, her sons have now gone far from her

once again into the land of exile.

The tribe of Ephraim enjoyed first born rights within the land of Israel. Ephraim was one of the two sons of Joseph, along with Manasseh, and he was given the first born portion by Jacob in the book of Genesis. Indeed the word Ephraim is often used as a synecdoche for the whole of the northern kingdom.

Ephraim is the main tribe and so he stands for the whole, just as Judah, the main tribe of the southern kingdom, can stand for the entirety of that nation. In many ways the end of the book of Genesis is a story of lost sons and their return. It is the playing out of what at first seems to be the tragedy of Rachel, which is later revealed to be a tragicomedy.

Sons once considered entirely lost, return with great blessing, and there is a similar hope held out here. Rachel is instructed to stop weeping. There is a reward for her work.

Her children will be restored to her, both in physical return and also in their hearts being turned back to the Lord. Rama had taken on a further significance beyond the death place of Rachel. In chapter 40 verse 1 we see that it was a stopping point as part of the deportation of the exiles to Babylon.

From this place of national bereavement the harrowing cries of the inconsolable bereaved mother cry out. The deep memory of ancient loss and the recently opened wound of the deported exiles come together at this point. The claim that Rachel will be rewarded is a strange one.

As Rabbi David Foreman has observed, the word is not the one that we would expect. We would expect the Lord to tell her to stop weeping, assuring her that he has taken compassion upon her and that she will be comforted. But the statement is rather that there is a reward for her work.

Once again it seems that the deep memory of the stories of Genesis is stirring here. In Genesis chapter 30 verses 14 to 18 we have an account of a strange interaction between the two sisters Leah and Rachel. In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah.

Then Rachel said to Leah, Please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But she said to her, Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? Rachel said, Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes. When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.

So he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband.

So she called his name Issachar. Understanding this strange episode requires that we perceive the significance of Reuben's mandrakes. It's not the mandrakes themselves, it's the person who picks them.

It's the first born son of Leah. As Foreman observes, the mandrakes are valuable because they are the first born son of Leah's gift to her, a token of his love for his mother. Leah felt that her sister Rachel had become a rival to her and taken her husband from her, and now she felt that she was taking her son too.

Jacob may not really love her as he loves Rachel, but at least her son Reuben loves her. For her part, Rachel had felt a great rivalry with her sister, because her sister bore many sons while she was barren. The two sons that her handmaid Bilhah had borne to Jacob had been named after the rivalry that she had with her sister.

Dan because the Lord had judged her case, and Naphtali because she had wrestled with great wrestling with her sister. In this episode however, she's trying to heal the breach. No longer is she presenting herself as a rival to her sister.

She gives to her sister what was once taken from her, relations with the man that she loves, Jacob. And Leah, through this union, has a child called Issachar. Issachar's name means wages or reward.

Here where the Lord says that there is a reward for what she has done, there seems to be a reference back to that old memory, the memory of the way that Rachel had tried to heal the breach in the family, a breach that ultimately led to tragic consequences. In the restoration of her children of the Northern Kingdom, and indeed all of the children of both of the kingdoms, the great matriarch Rachel would be rewarded for the reconciliation that she tried to bring to the divided family of Jacob. Her tragic story of lost sons and dying in childbirth would reach a redemptive end as her sons would all be returned to her.

As with the story of the Exodus, the deep memory of Israel is being brought to mind here as a source of comfort, assurance and orientation as they face the future. These verses are perhaps most familiar to Christians from the context of Matthew chapter 2 where they appear in the context of the massacre of the innocents. In that chapter there is another fainter echo of the story of Rachel, in the earlier reference back to Micah chapter 5 verse 2, in which context the shadow of Rachel hangs heavily over a text that proves to be greatly redemptive.

Along with the weeping of the disconsolate mother, the pathos of the Lord himself is seen in his relationship to Ephraim. He has heard the cries of the disciplined child, a child now repenting of his former sins, and the heart of the Lord yearns for his son in the far country. He constantly remembers him, he will have mercy upon him, and he will be restored.

Verses 21-22 address presumably the Judahite exiles. They are supposed to mark the path that they go into exile. The Lord assures them that they will return by the same route.

They will take up residence in their old cities once more. A woman formerly described as an adulterous bride, as a harlot, and also as a widow, is now described as a virgin daughter. When the Lord redeems them, their youth and their purity will be restored to them.

However now they are still wavering, they are still faithless. That transformation still has to occur. In chapter 30 verse 6 there was a reversal described, as the strong men were described, like pregnant women.

Ask now and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labour? Why has every face turned pale? The second half of verse 22 is difficult to interpret. Does it have a positive or a negative meaning? What does it mean for a woman to encircle a man? Is it some allusion to birth? Reading it alongside the reversal of chapter 30 verse 6 makes most sense I think. The image here is of the weakness of the people of Judah.

As they went half into exile the mighty men of Judah were so sapped of their strength that they needed to be protected by the women. Verses 23 to 26 seem to record a reassuring dream that Jeremiah has. To the dispirited and disheartened exiles, who are so lacking in strength, the word of the Lord comes about the restoration of Jerusalem and all of the life of the land of Judah.

The land and the city of Jerusalem will be blessed once more. Both the urban life of its cities and the rural life of its farms will prosper and thrive once more. A people now afflicted by panic, fear, weakness and want within would find satisfaction and rest.

The Lord declares his commitment to restore both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, sowing them with the seed of man and the seed of beast. The idea of sowing people can also be found in the book of Hosea chapter 2 verses 21 to 23. A similar use of imagery underlies Jesus' parable of the sower.

While some in Judah and Israel might fear that the Lord was so committed to putting them into exile as a result of their sins and now has largely abandoned them and no longer considers them in their exile state, he assures them here that he is every bit as committed to restoring them to the land as he was to driving them away from it as a result of their sin. Another possible fear of the exiles is that they will never escape the dark shadow of their father's sins. The northern kingdom of Israel had been more or less doomed after the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, sins in which his successors of several different dynasties largely continued.

The southern kingdom for its part seemed to be doomed as a result of the sins of Manasseh. Many people here draw attention to the principle in Deuteronomy of sons not being put to death because of the sins of their fathers. In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 16, Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers.

Each one shall be put to death for his own sin. Some scholars have suggested a move into a sort of moral individualism at this point. Each person will have to give account of himself and will only suffer the consequences of his own sins.

However, in scripture there are numerous examples of sons suffering as a result of their father's sins. And as I have already noted, both Israel and Judah seemed to be doomed as a result of the sins of particular kings, even after some degree of subsequent reformation. A more helpful parallel passage is found in Ezekiel chapter 18 verses 1-4 and then in verse 20.

The word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

Behold, all souls are mine. The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine. The soul whose sins shall die.

The soul whose sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

The principle as it is developed in Ezekiel chapter 18 seems to be more specific. Blaming the sins of the fathers for the suffering that was coming upon them as their sons was an easy way of abdicating responsibility for the sins that they were committing. It was also a fatalistic statement, a statement that there was no hope of turning things around, being doomed from the start by the sins of those that preceded them.

There was no hope of a new beginning. By denying the applicability of the proverb, the Lord is making two particular points. First, that if they suffer, they will suffer on account of their own sins, sins that continue in the path set by the fathers.

Also, that they will experience a new beginning. They will no longer have to exist in the shadow of the sins of kings like Manasseh and Ahaz. Verses 31-34 are the most famous verses in the whole book, verses that are found in the New Testament, both alluded to and explicitly cited.

From the day that the Lord had delivered them from Egypt, the problem for Israel had always been their unfaithfulness. God had given them a great covenant, but they had

broken it. The Lord had written his law on tablets of stone that were stored in the Ark of the Covenant at the heart of the tabernacle, and yet the people had broken them time and again.

While they may have declared the affirmation of it in covenant ceremonies, the word of the Lord lay outside of them, and they resisted it. The promise of the new covenant is that the Lord will place his law in the heart of his people, so that the consistent problem of the covenant, the people themselves, would be addressed. It would be through this that the covenant formula, I will be their God and they shall be my people, would actually come to its true fruition.

With the law in their hearts, the people would be marked out as the Lord's special possession, and with the law in their hearts, they would walk in his ways. This would also lead to a movement away from the old order that was dominated by mediation, with God being at some distance from his people, with intermediaries having to be interposed between the people and the Lord in order that the people might have some sort of knowledge of him. In this new covenant order, the knowledge of the Lord would be enjoyed more generally by the people.

The Lord would be close to and knowable by them. This would be enjoyed from the least of them to the greatest, from the youngest child to the oldest elder, from the richest to the poorest, from the king on his throne to the slave in the mine. Knowledge of the Lord would entail knowledge of the covenant, and also the knowledge that is characterized by obedience, walking in his ways, doing justice and righteousness.

All of this would be possible because the Lord had forgiven the sins of Judah. The sins for which they had been cast into exile were no longer held against them. They could now enjoy a clean slate and a new start.

Now refounded on a new footing, the people were no longer fated to live out the old patterns of rebellion followed by punishment. All of this, we should consider, is a fulfillment of prophecies like Deuteronomy 30, verses 1-6, where the Lord declared that he would circumcise the heart of his people. After all the curse and the punishment had come upon them, and they had been scattered to foreign lands, he would draw them back, gather them back into the land, and he would change their heart.

And so the covenant would be fulfilled as the Lord forgave his people and dealt with their heart problem that had always been the great underlying issue. The immediate horizon of Jeremiah's prophecy is the restoration from exile. This is what the prophecy immediately relates to.

As the people are brought back to the land, their hearts will be turned back to God. They will know the Lord in a new way, in a way that they did not know him before. It will be a period where they are no longer defined by the sins that defined them in the past.

It will also be a period where there will no longer be large-scale national apostasy. Individuals may apostatize, but the larger nation will be faithful. These are significant and decisive shifts for the people of God.

This is an initial fulfillment of what has greater fulfillment in the work of Christ, and a greater fulfillment yet in the age to come. This feature of different levels of fulfillment of promissory statements in scripture is something that we see on a number of occasions. For instance, the prophecy about David and his son that the Lord gives in 2 Samuel 7 refers to the son that David will have and speaks of the establishment of his kingdom forever.

Its initial and immediate referent is Solomon, but it looks beyond Solomon to things that will be fulfilled in a greater figure yet. When we apply the promise of the new covenant, as the book of Hebrews does, to the work of Christ, we should be careful not to uproot it from its original historical context, which refers to the return from exile. On the other hand, we must be careful not to see it terminating entirely upon the return from exile.

The return from exile always opens out into a greater promissory reality that the Lord holds out to his people, a promissory reality that is not completely fulfilled in the first instance, but looks towards a greater resolution, and will finally be realized only through the work of Christ. For those wondering whether the Lord still has a purpose for Israel, whether there is hope after the Lord has cast Israel into exile, verses 35-37 give assurance. The Lord, who has created all things, has also created Israel, and just as he has committed to the patterns of the creation, the sun for light by day, and the order of the moon and the stars by night, so he has committed to Israel, he has not abandoned them.

Nothing can separate Israel from the love of God. The immeasurable character of the heavens and the foundations of the earth correspond to God's immeasurable grace to the people who have sinned against him so many times. From these assurances of the re-founding of Israel's relationship with the Lord comes another promise of the Lord's establishment of his people again in the land.

The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and expanded. Formerly defiled places will be recovered and made sacred to the Lord. And any cycle of tearing down and plucking up will be arrested as the Lord, having built and planted his people within the land once more, will give them security and rest there.

A question to consider, how can we as Christians relate this passage concerning the new covenant to our life as the people of God in the Church, without doing violence to its original context? How might we develop the continuity between the original context and our own? 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 1 to 34 And that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James,

then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed. Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise, if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive, but each in his own order.

Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For God has put all things in subjection under his feet. But when it says, All things are put in subjection, it is plain that he is accepted who put all things in subjection under him.

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. Otherwise what do people mean by being baptised on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord. I die every day.

What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Do not be deceived. Bad company ruins good morals.

Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning, for some have

no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15 Paul moves to a new issue, the resurrection.

This is the last of the major issues that he tackles in the letter. He doesn't seem to be responding to questions that the Corinthians have written to him about here though, as in the case of the earlier matters. Rather, this is likely something that has been reported to him by particular persons in the church.

He has previously mentioned such reports concerning the sectarianism in the church, the man who is having sexual relations with his father's wife, and their appalling behaviour at the supper. It may be easy to read this chapter as a self-contained treatise on the resurrection, detached from what has gone before. We might think that it's of a different kind from the earlier issues.

It's an issue more of faulty belief than practice. It isn't about sexual conduct or behaviour in worship or community relations, so Paul needs to shift into a doctrinal gear here. The truth of the resurrection is absolutely integral to Christian faith, and Paul clearly needs to address this question at the end of his letter.

However, if we examine this chapter more closely, we should see that it isn't just a doctrinal appendix to the letter, but it draws out a fundamental issue that underlies so many of the others. It connects very organically with the rest of the letter, and is a very fitting conclusion to the whole thing. The letter began by emphasising the message of the cross, and it ends with stressing the truth of the resurrection.

It addresses the Corinthians' failure to appreciate the logic of gift at the heart of the gospel. This is a gospel about the God who gives life to the dead. This is a gospel about dying to the world and its values in the cross, and being made alive to God in an act of transformative grace.

The fact that a number of the Corinthians' problems seem to derive from their failure to value the physical body as they ought, suggests that this chapter isn't just an appendix. There's something about this chapter that addresses core issues underlying the whole of the letter. In chapter 6 verses 13-20 we read, For as it is written, the two will become one flesh, but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body.

The resurrection of the body would seem crassly physical to many of the Corinthians in their super-spirituality. They are elevated above the realm of the body, and the physical resurrection undermines this. And if they're elevated above the realm of the body, the

sort of moral requirements that can be laid upon the body can be relaxed also.

The belief in the resurrection of the dead, while present in apocalyptic Judaism, would have been quite unpalatable to obeying former pagans. A further issue for the Corinthians was their over-realized eschatology. They believed that they already reigned like kings, and had attained to the heights of spirituality.

Paul, in talking about the resurrection of the dead, focuses on something that we must look forward to. We have not already attained it. We're looking forward to and awaiting it.

Richard Hayes notes that Paul ends both of the major sections of the chapter by referring to the importance of the righteous behaviour and labour of the Corinthians. It is the expectation of the resurrection of the body in the future that gives weight to our activities in the body right now. And in this first part of his argument in this chapter, up to verse 34, Paul's concern is to show that belief in the resurrection is essential to the gospel.

The first eleven verses articulate the fundamental gospel message, the apostolic witness and the tradition that he passed on to them when he first preached the gospel to them. This is the message of their salvation itself, and at its core lies the crucifixion of Christ according to the scriptures, his burial, his resurrection on the third day according to the scriptures, and his appearance to the apostles and witnesses. This message is an essential apostolic tradition.

It's the most important thing of all. It's core to the body of teaching that the apostles, as the foundation of the church, were commissioned to communicate. Paul received this himself, and he passes it on to them.

And Paul enumerates and identifies a number of witnesses to the resurrection. The large number of the witnesses, the independent witness accounts, the multiple appearances, the known identities and character of the witnesses, the fact that most of the witnesses were still alive at the time of Paul's writing, and the realistic possibility of investigating and corroborating his claims, all give great weight to the testimony of the resurrection. This wasn't something that happened in a corner, with only a few unreliable or inaccessible witnesses.

While the resurrection is an event that dramatically alters the character of all human history, it is a historical event that occurred in time and space. It was also a physical event. There was a body in a tomb, and then there was no body there.

Beyond the eyewitnesses, there is also the fact that both the event of Christ's death and the event of his resurrection occurred according to the scriptures. The prophetic testimony of the scriptures is a further confirmatory witness. The witness of the

scriptures makes clear that the death and resurrection of Christ are not just powerful miracles proving God's power, nor are they just anomalous events.

Rather, in these events, the story that the entirety of scripture tells reaches its climax. And here we should probably recognize the fuller way in which the apostles following Christ read the Old Testament. They saw genuine promises of resurrection in places where we, with our dulled reading, might not see them.

So places in the Psalms, for instance, you will not let your Holy One see corruption. Things like the stories of scripture, the story of Joseph, Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah in the belly of the big fish, prophecies in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and elsewhere. All of these scriptural witnesses could be marshaled to show that the events of the death and resurrection of Christ did not just happen by accident.

They were events that fulfilled God's promises and purposes that had gone on since the foundation of the world. Paul himself is a witness of the resurrection. He is an appointed apostle.

He is not merely testifying to some tradition that he received second hand. We might ask what exactly the Corinthians were denying. Were they denying that there was some sort of post-mortal existence? At points, that may be possible.

Were they claiming that the resurrection had already occurred, but was some inner and spiritual event? In scripture we do read of such persons. Then they might be thinking that the resurrection was not a bodily event, but the Christian faith is merely about the deliverance of the soul. Most likely there's some variety and mixture of these positions at play in the Corinthian church.

It seems to me, however, that the key issues surrounded the question not of post-mortal existence as such, but bodily resurrection. Of course, if there were no bodily resurrection, the fact of Christ's own bodily resurrection, so central to the apostolic gospel message, becomes a problem. If Christ is not bodily raised, the gospel message and the salvation that rests upon it swiftly unravel.

The apostles turn out to be unreliable witnesses. Indeed, the sheer weight of the unreliable testimony that they would be bearing would throw everything else that they said into doubt. Not only would their preaching be in vain, though, so would the Corinthians' faith.

The salvation that they proclaimed would be proven empty. The Corinthians would be still in their sins. Christians who had died would have entirely perished, and Christians would be a pitiable group of people, enslaved to an empty hope.

Yet, of course, none of these things are in fact the case. Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first sheaf that guarantees

the greater harvest.

The resurrection isn't just an event that sets Christ apart. It's the opening of the womb of the tomb. There is a direct connection between Christ's resurrection and our own.

Christ's resurrection has significance for all humanity in Him. Adam's death brought death to humanity, but Christ's resurrection is the source of life for all who belong to Him, the new humanity formed as His body by the Spirit. We should note that our resurrection is a participation in Christ's resurrection, rather than a situation where we and Christ are just participating in a common event.

Paul writes in Philippians 3, verses 8-11, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. This all happens in an appropriate order.

Christ, the firstborn of the dead, the one who opens the womb of the grave, is raised first. Then at the end, when Christ returns, the rest of us are raised with Him. This will lead to the final defeat of death.

Christ has been raised to God's right hand and He will reign there until all enemies have been subdued. Paul alludes to Psalm 110 verse 1 here, one of the most popular Old Testament verses in the New Testament. It's a verse speaking of the Messiah's exalted authority.

The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. This may possibly also be a reference to Psalm 8 verses 3 to 8. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.

You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. Psalm 8 is used to refer to Christ's exalted authority as the second man and the last Adam in the book of Hebrews. The truth of Christ's ascension is also brought forward by Paul then against the denial of bodily resurrection here.

If the dead are not raised, then Christ's victory is incomplete. The final boss, death itself, is left unvanquished. Many have seen a sort of subordinationism in Paul's remarks about

the Father's relationship to the Son here.

However, it is important to bear in mind that this reveals triune relations in terms of the creator-creature framework. The passage also refers not to the eternal relation between Father and Son, but to the culminating moment in the great drama of redemption, the moment when the submission of the Son arrives at its perfect completion. The submission of the Son in these verses is not a reference to the eternal unbroken relation between Father and Son in the Godhead, but to the climax of the work of the incarnate Son, when his mission arrives at its final telos.

This is the reality of his authoritative obedience being fully and utterly realised, and the complete divine authority he has effected is exhaustively related back to the Father as its source. A closer look at this passage reveals the mutually defining relationship between Father and Son. All divine authority in the world is put into effect through the Son, and without him no divine authority is effected.

All things are put under him. Indeed, the Son's bringing about of the divine authority is the precondition for the Father's being all in all. On the other hand, it is the Father who exhaustively authorises the Son.

The Father places all things under his Son. The Son renders all things up to the Father. It is important to read this in terms of earlier teaching in the book, in places like chapter 8, verses 5-6, which speaks of the oneness of God, Father, Son and Spirit.

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. Both the authority of Father and Son are comprehensive, the only distinction between them being prepositional. It is from the Father and for the Father.

It is through the Son. There is another expression of the unity of God in chapter 12, verses 4-6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

One Spirit, one Lord, one God. And the result of this is the completion of the pattern, and God being all in all, as all things are placed under Christ's feet and he renders them all up to the Father. Paul changes tack in verse 29, trying to show that if the resurrection is denied, the practices of the Church and Christians lose their meaningfulness and credibility.

Indeed, they become a sort of foolishness. The first example he gives here is one that has caused all sorts of speculation. It's the example of baptism for the dead.

The meaning of this expression, and whatever the practice to which it refers is, has produced endless debate and speculation. Is it deathbed baptism? Is it the washing of dead bodies? Is it ritual or ceremonial washing after touching a corpse, according to the Jewish law? Perhaps it is baptism with reference to departed martyrs or faithful Christians. Perhaps it's response to their martyrdoms or in some association with them.

Maybe it was some kind of vicarious or proxy baptism. Perhaps living people were being baptized on behalf of people who had already died. Or perhaps it refers to people being baptized out of the desire to be reunited with those they had known and loved and who had died before them.

Such a motive for baptism would require a very strong belief in the resurrection of the dead. Anthony Thistleton argues for this view, and I think this is probably the most persuasive of the options out there. Most of the other options entail some sort of straining of the language that Paul actually uses here.

It's important to consider the connection between baptism and Christ's sufferings in the flesh. We see this in Luke 12, verse 50. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.

Our connection to Christ in baptism is focused upon the body. It's focused upon the reality of the resurrection also. In Romans chapter 6, verses 3-14 we read, We would certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

We know that our old self was crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God.

So you also must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law, but under grace. In baptism, then, our bodies are marked with a seal of resurrection. In baptism the Church confesses its confidence in the resurrection of the dead, Christ's resurrection in the past, and our anticipation of our participation in his resurrection in the future.

It matters that baptism is performed upon our physical bodies. Some people will get

baptised with this reality particularly foregrounded. They have lost loved ones, and throw themselves upon Christ, the victor over the grave, so that they too may be delivered from the clutches of death by his grace, and be united in his resurrection and the general resurrection with those whom they have lost who testified to his power over the tomb.

This, I believe, is the most compelling way to understand Paul's reference to baptism for the dead. Beyond this, Paul refers to the fact that he is constantly putting his life on the line for the gospel. He is facing fierce and vicious opposition, something that he can metaphorically refer to as wild beasts.

These are people seeking his life. And it's completely foolish to do this if in fact there is no resurrection. If it were the case that there were no resurrection, the best thing to do would be to enjoy life in the flesh now as much as possible.

Faithfulness in the present rests upon our confident hope of the raising of our bodies to new life. And the behaviour of some of the Corinthians was driven by their failure to consider future hope and the way in which our bodies will be raised. And they have meaning in the present as a result of that fact, because they have a destiny and a future in which they have a part.

Paul's discussion of the resurrection here now gets at the very heart of some of the problems in Corinth. A question to consider. How could we elaborate and fill out Paul's teaching that Christ's resurrection is not merely the resurrection of one individual, but the inauguration of the resurrection, the general resurrection of the dead that is awaited by God's people?