

In prison, Paul awaits trial on potentially capital charges. He writes his last letter, with the possible exception of Philemon, in the early 60's CE. (I paraphrase) *You belong to Christ, every bit of your life, all of who you are and all of what you have done and left unfinished, so forget what lies in the past, every bit of it, the trophies and the debris, and press on to what lies ahead, for you are called to the high calling of becoming one with God.*

One of the most radical features of Christianity is its utter repudiation of status based on birth into privileged circumstances or based on personal accomplishments. Paul lists seven social identity markers that describe his earlier religious life. The first four markers reflect the privileged circumstances of his birth. Paul was born into a Torah-observant family, where ethnic and tribal affiliations were maintained and where a child learned Hebrew.

The last three identify markers pertain to Paul's accomplishments as an adult and follow roughly the topics of vocation, moral character, and notable accomplishments. Paul's conclusion: his reasons for boasting were mere table-scrap compared to the prize of being known by Christ and of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Another radical feature of Christianity is its eschatological orientation. The knowledge of Christ remains a relentless quest. Paul pictures himself as a runner nearing the end of a race. He does not look back over the distance he has covered but stays focused on the finish line. Paul sees his past and his present circumstances in light of his hope for the future. Forgetting what lies behind he stretches out to what lies ahead.

Is it possible for us in the 21st century to share Paul's hope of resurrection life? Frederick Buechner offers some reasons for such hope. First, if I were God, he says, and loved the people I created and wanted them to become at least the best they had it in them to be, I couldn't imagine consigning them to oblivion when their time came to an end with the job only a fraction done.

Second, apart from any religious considerations, "I have a hunch it is true. I intuited it." If victims and the victimizers, the wise and the foolish, the good-hearted and the heartless all end up alike in the grave and that is the end of it, then life would be a black comedy or worse, and life doesn't feel like a black comedy.

Life feels as though, at the innermost heart of it, there is Holiness, and that we experience all the horrors that go on both around us and within us as horrors rather than as just the way the cookie crumbles because, in our innermost hearts, we belong to Holiness, which the horrors are a tragic departure from.

Finally, I believe what happens to us after we die is that we aren't dead forever because Jesus said so. Buechner puts these reasons in a letter to his mother who had asked him what he thought happens when we die. Katherine refused to talk about death; she

even refused to talk about people she loved who had died. She didn't even talk about her mother. It made her too sad, she said.

Her New York apartment was full of photographs in silver frames, but only of the living. Jesus was another of the dead people she refused to talk about, so he had no idea how she would receive the letter. Weeks later, when he asked her about the letter she only said, "It made me cry."

How can we share Paul's hope? Paul gives us a curriculum. We begin with the experience of sensing ourselves as possessed by Christ. A few, like Paul, may come to this knowledge by being blinded by the light.

For the rest of us, awakening to the holiness at the innermost heart of life comes in less dramatic ways but no less real: a starry night, giving or receiving mercy, being overwhelmed by kindness or seized by the truth, sharing bread and wine and open-hearted communion, the touch of a lover. In any number of ways we may discover, in our innermost hearts, that we belong to holiness.

Secondly, we can set our minds on those things that are true, honorable, just, commendable, whatever is worthy praise. In thinking on these things, contemplating these things, we discern what is worthy of our lives. The holy becomes our north star. Walking in the light of this star enlarges our hope.

Finally, we can deepen the experience of being possessed by Christ by sharing in the fellowship of suffering with Christ. We don't seek to suffer but we are willing to suffer in seeking what is necessary for the well-being and salvation of others. To do so to the point of being conformed to Christ's death is to know the power of resurrection life.

When we live in faithfulness to the holiness at the innermost heart of life, our desires are not dissipated in trivial pursuits but are directed and empowered to press forward in the hope of knowing the prize of the high calling of God.