

“Resurrection Victory”

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

I have read somewhere that there is a preacher of the ‘old school’ who speaks as boldly as ever. He is not popular, although the world is his parish. He travels every part of the globe and speaks in every language. He visits the poor, calls upon the rich, preaches to people of every religion and no religion, and the subject of his sermon is always the same. He is an eloquent preacher, often stirring feelings which no other preacher could, and bringing tears to eyes that never weep. His arguments none are able to refute, nor is there any heart that has remained unmoved by the force of his appeals. He shatters life with his message. Most people hate him; everyone fears him. His name? Death. Every tombstone is his pulpit, every newspaper prints his text, and someday every one of us will be his sermon. In other words, death is the universal experience of humanity, faced by everyone and escaped by no one.

J.C. Ryle—“*Death is the mighty leveler. He spares no one. He will not tarry until you are ready. He will not be kept out by moats, and doors, and bars, and bolts.*”

It reminds me of an epitaph that I heard about on a grave marker somewhere. The inscription on the tombstone said:

*Remember, Man, as you go by,
as you are now so once was I;
As I am now, so shall you be,
Prepare yourself to follow me.*

Now, if I had read that myself, I would have been tempted to reply:

*To follow you I'm not content,
Until I know which way you went!*

The subject of death and dying is one that try to avoid. The world around us offers no legitimate solutions. The world's leading thinkers and philosophers are puzzled by it.

Sigmund Freud—*“And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.”*

Freud never read 1 Corinthians 15. If you have your Bible, turn with me there once more, a chapter that we have been studying since Easter Sunday, several weeks back. The central theme of this chapter is the resurrection, both of Jesus Christ and the believer who is united to Him through faith. Within the chapter, Paul makes the point that the gospel is a resurrection gospel, which means we possess resurrection hope. That Christ is risen means we have a resurrection guarantee, which then provides us with some resurrection incentives as we live our lives now. Paul then deals with the resurrection body, and he answers a couple of questions that are raised in verse 35, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” He then explains how our resurrection body will be an ‘upgrade’ from the one we currently have now. A final thing that we will consider as we finish our study of the chapter is that through Christ we have resurrection victory.

1—A TRANSFORMATION we are waiting for (15:50-53)

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

In the previous verses, Paul has been explaining the nature of the resurrection body that believers will one day receive. He says in verse 49 that just as we have borne the image of Adam, the man of dust, so also will we bear the image of Christ, the Man of heaven. So that means that believers must undergo a transformation or 'change,' a word that is used twice in verses 51-52.

“Change”—word *‘allasso’* and means *to be made different; to exchange one thing for another; to be transformed*

The reason for this change (v. 50)

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”

Why must we undergo a physical change? The reason is that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. He is referring to the current makeup of our physical condition in these bodies that are time bound and fitted for earth, and are therefore subject to corruption. When Paul says ‘flesh and blood’ he means that which is perishable. It is refers to the body as it is now.

How will our future resurrection body be different than our body now? Again, go back through verse 42 and notice what he has said about the body as it is now versus what it will be when resurrected. The body we have now is:

- Perishable (v. 42)

To say that something is ‘perishable’ is to say that it has a shelf life. Our current bodies are in the process of wearing out. Our eyes dim. Our ears deafen. Our senses dull. Slowly but surely, these bodies wear down and deteriorate until the time comes that they completely shut down in death. The reason is because they are perishable bodies subject to corruption brought on by a fallen existence.

- Dishonor (v. 43a)

The word that is translated as ‘dishonor’ is a word that indicates shame or disgrace. There comes a point in our life when these bodies age to such a degree that we are dependent upon others for care. When we are young, we take care of our children. When are old, our children take care of us. And so it goes.

Chuck Swindoll — *“Paul also may have had in mind the condition of the body after its death, when it is ‘sown’ (that is, buried) in dishonor, hidden away in the earth or in a tomb because of the intolerable stench of death and the unbearable decay that ensues within days.”*

- Weakness (v. 43b)

The word ‘weakness’ means feeble or frail and describes our common weakness or our fragile health. It speaks of the absence of strength to understand something, or to do something, or to bear up under stress. We can all identify with that definition, can’t we? We know our limitations. We know what we personally struggle with.

William Barclay — *“It is nowadays fashionable to talk of man’s power, but the really remarkable thing is his weakness. A drought of air or a drop of water can kill him. We are limited in this life so often simply because of the necessary limitations of the body. Time and time again our physical constitution says to our visions and our plans, ‘This far and no farther.’ We are so often frustrated because we are what we are. But in the life to come the limitations will be gone. Here we are compassed about with weakness; there we will be clothed with power.”*

- Natural (v. 44-46)

Paul is not saying that the resurrection body isn't physical, because we know that it most certainly is. We don't have to look any further than what the gospels say about the body of Jesus after His resurrection.

Luke 24:36-43—“As they were talking about these things, Jesus Himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you!’ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, He said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate before them.”

The resurrected, glorified body of Jesus was physical, but it wasn't simply natural. It was supernatural. Patterned after His, Paul says that our resurrection body will be a spiritual body. He doesn't say that it will be a spirit, as in a ghost or apparition. The natural body that we currently have is prone to weakness, deterioration, and eventual death. It is suited for life on earth. But the body we will be given in a spiritual body that will be perfectly fit for eternal existence. We need to understand the adjective that Paul is using there for 'spiritual.'

Alan Gomes—*“To have a ‘spiritual body’ is to possess a body controlled or directed by God’s Spirit. The idea behind the word ‘spiritual’ is that of control, not substance or matter.”*

The contrast is between the body we now have which is corruptible, decaying, and doomed to die, and the future body we will be given which is incorruptible, undecaying, and never to die again.

- Earthly (v. 47-49)

As those who are naturally born humans, we bear the same physical and earthly nature as Adam. When he sinned, God said the consequence of that sin was that he would return to very dust from which he had been made. And so it goes with all who live and die in Adam. But for those are in Christ, when we are resurrected, we will bear the same spiritual and heavenly nature as the Lord Jesus. Spiritually, I have already been raised with Christ. His life is flowing through me as someone who has been saved by grace through faith. And the only thing I am waiting for now is the future redemption of my body. When that happens, we will be totally free from the domain of sin. And though these earthly bodies in which we currently live are destined to perish, it is only temporary. There is coming a day when our spirits will be reunited with our new and glorified bodies. They will have been miraculously transformed and glorified and made fit for eternity.

One of the reasons that people don't long for eternity as much as they ought to may be due to the fact that they have an unbiblical understanding of what it will be. Think about how seldom you hear the truth of bodily resurrection emphasized at a funeral. Our eternal home will not consist of a disembodied existence whereby we will all be floating around on a cloud. No, God's plan for you and me involves an embodied existence in a perfect environment. We will run and never grow weary. We will eat but never out of a sense of necessity. We will rest but not because we are dog tired. We will enjoy unending companionship with those we love. And most important of all, we will be in the

eternal presence of the Lord Jesus. This truth of bodily resurrection means that the time will come when all who believe will receive a glorified body fit for eternity in the new heaven and the new earth.

The revelation of this change (v. 51-52)

“Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”

We know that the dead in Christ will rise and will be the first to receive their resurrection bodies when Christ comes. It is clear from what Paul has said earlier in the chapter. But what about those who are living when Jesus returns? If the second coming were to happen and you were alive when He comes, what happens then? That is what Paul goes on to explain next. He says that it is a ‘mystery.’

“Mystery”—*something previously hidden*

Whenever the term ‘mystery’ is used in the New Testament, it always refers to a truth that had been previously hidden in the Old Testament period, but is now revealed. Mystery truth is something that the saints in the Old Testament did not see because it had not been made plain to them.

I’ve heard it explained this way:

- *There are some things that God reveals to no one*

Deuteronomy 29:29a—**“The secret things belong to the Lord our God...”**

- *There are some things that God reveals to everyone*

Romans 1:19-20—**“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His**

eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

- *There are some things that God reveals to His people*

Deuteronomy 29:29b—“but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

1 Corinthians 2:14—“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

- *There are some things that God has hidden for a period of time that are now revealed in Christ*

Matthew 13:11—“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

There are several of these ‘mystery’ truths revealed in the pages of the New Testament. There is the mystery of the kingdom mentioned in Matthew 13. There is the mystery of the church as the body of Christ made up of both Jew and Gentile according to Ephesians 3:1-11. Then, there is the mystery of lawlessness which is the continuation and build up of iniquity that will eventually culminate in the man of lawlessness according to 2 Thessalonians 2:7. And there is the mystery of the rapture of the church at the end of the age, which is what Paul is explaining here in 1 Corinthians 15. He says we shall not all sleep—or experience physical death—but we shall all be changed. You and I have got to be changed to go to heaven. We can’t go there the way we currently are. We will be transformed. The generation of believers who are alive when Jesus comes again will be miraculously changed.

How will it happen? Notice how verse 53 says that it will happen in a flash, in a split second, in the twinkling of an eye. In other words, it will not be some long and drawn out process of change. No, it will be an instantaneous change that will happen. When will it happen? Paul says that it will take place at the last trumpet. This same thing is explained elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17—“For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”

“Caught Up”—*the Greek word is ‘harpazo’ which means to be seized and carried away*

Whenever the New Testament was translated into Latin, the word used to translate this same verb was the Latin word ‘raptura’ which is where we get the term ‘rapture’ from. ‘Rapture’ is the event associated with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ when He will receive believers unto Himself at His return. It will be a sudden and unannounced event.

The result of this change (v. 53)

“For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

When this supernatural change takes place, notice what the result will be. The perishable body that we have now will be clothed with the imperishable. Such change ‘must’ happen because we can’t live in an imperishable world in a

perishable body. The body we receive in the resurrection is an ‘imperishable’ body which means it will not be subject to corruption. It will not have a shelf life, but will instead be fit for eternity. Our body will be incorruptible and glorified, like the beauty of a flower that will never fade.

The body that we have now is sown in weakness. But the body that is raised, however, verse 43 says it will be raised in ‘power.’ The word is ‘dunamis’ which refers to explosive power and ability. All weaknesses will be vanquished and we will live in a perfect and permanent existence. What has been only mortal will have put on immortality. We will be fit for an eternity with Christ. What a glorious transformation!

2—A TRIUMPH we are grateful for (15:54-57)

“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Notice that Paul uses the word ‘victory’ three times in these verses. Resurrection is all about victory that has been won through the Lord Jesus. When it is all said and done, death will be swallowed up in victory. As it stands now, death is an enemy. Our experience with it can be summed up in the word ‘tragedy.’ This present life involves tragedy and pain, hardship and loss. Death looms on the horizon, both for us as well as for those we love. And yet we wince at the thought, don’t we?

Ecclesiastes 7:2—“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.”

In other words, being reminded of death has a lot to teach us about life. Funerals have a way of teaching us to be wise in the way we live and prepare for our own. A funeral does more for your soul than a party because death has a way of reminding you of your own mortality. It provokes sober-minded thinking. We will die someday. Yet we often try to avoid the thought of it at all costs. So when we pass a funeral procession, or read an obituary, or lose a loved one—it serves as a sobering reminder of what is on the horizon. That’s what the wise writer of Ecclesiastes is saying in that verse. Death is the inevitable appointment held by all humanity, and the living should take this to heart. Man must not ignore the fact.

John MacArthur—*“The inevitability of death is an enemy. We fear it. We hide from it. We evade it. We try to avoid it. We mask it. It devastates us. It breaks long, loving unions. It leaves unfinished symphonies. It removes people who are greatly needed. It wrecks our tranquility. It is our enemy, and there’s no getting around it.”*

Hebrews 9:27—“It is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment.”

There will be no raincheck. You can’t call death’s secretary and reschedule the appointment for a later time. Death will come, whether you are ready or not. Now imagine facing your own mortality, or sitting down and planning your funeral, all without an understanding of this triumph over death that Paul describes for us in these verses. Without this promise, death would be hopeless and final. Food for worms is all that you and I would be. Every single one of a person’s accomplishments in life would not matter. It all ends in death! Hear the voice of

triumph in the words of the apostle—Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

How has He done this? By removing the sting of death. It is the sting that takes a person out. We fear bees because of their sting. But a bee without a stinger is nothing to be feared. In fact, a bee without a sting will not last very long.

Through this use of analogy, Paul says in verse 56 that the ‘sting’ of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

Romans 3:23—“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Romans 6:23—“The wages of sin is death...”

This is the sting that Paul is referring to. It isn’t death itself that harms a person. Death is simply the end of physical existence. Sin is the sting, or more specifically, unforgiven sin. Death has no real power over anyone unless there is sin that hasn’t been dealt with. The power of sin is the law of God that has been broken. The law of God is the perfect standard of righteousness that shows us our sin. Do you remember how the word for ‘sin’ means to miss the mark? Well, the law is what sets the mark that sin misses. Sin is what leads to death.

On the cross, death buried its ‘sting’ in the body of Jesus.

2 Corinthians 5:21 — “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

That’s why Paul could taunt death the way that he does in verse 55 as he says, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” If you are in Christ, death no longer has any power over you. It has no sting for the man or woman who has trusted in Christ. The penalty for my sin has already been paid. Death’s sting has been buried in Christ and is therefore removed.

Psalm 116:15—“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.”

Psalm 118:17—“I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.”

We have victory over death through the Lord Jesus. The reason is that the Christian’s debt has been paid. The life of Christ is now mine. Jesus said in John 14, “Because I live, you also will live.”

This truth of our resurrection was the hope that Winston Churchill expressed when he planned his own funeral. After a prayer by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the singing of “God Save the Queen,” a trumpet player was perched in the highest reaches of the dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral and played Taps. As the last sorrowful note faded, high in another gallery, another trumpeter was then positioned to play Reveille. It was the call to rise!

Thus, Paul’s outburst of praise in verse 57—“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The language is in the present tense so that it could literally read, “Thanks be to God who keeps on giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It means the triumph of Jesus Christ is ours to experience each and every day so that we consciously live in the victory of Christ. That was the number one goal of Paul’s life:

Philippians 3:10—“That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection.”

Each and every day, the power of Christ’s resurrection is ours to enjoy, to savor, and to glory in. It is this power that supplies us for service. Paul mentions a transformation we are waiting for, and a triumph we are grateful for. One final thing involves:

3—A TARGET we are aiming for (15:58)

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

The word ‘therefore’ is important because it links what Paul has said with a closing admonition. In light of all that he has shared about the resurrection and the rapture, notice that Paul concludes with a very practical application. The truth of resurrection is not something that we sit around and ponder while remaining indifferent. We are not to be complacent as we wait for the trumpet blast signaling the Lord’s return. No, it serves to motivate us to serve God and make the most of the time we have in this life. This is life-changing truth that is meant to affect the decisions we make, not just on Sunday when we gather to worship, but on Monday morning when we go to work, or get the kids out the door for school. Resurrection power impacts the way that we relate to other people in our lives, especially to one another in the family of God.

Listen again to what Paul says in verse 58:

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

So much of our decision making today comes from emotion and not from a volitional act of the will whereby the mind is settled on the truth and the heart is determined to obey. An emotional subjectivism best describes today’s commitment levels. I’ll do something if I ‘feel’ like it.

All of us have experienced pain and disappointment in some way. We get hurt in our relationships. Things happen that we didn’t expect. But what are you to do with that hurt? You can let it fester to the point of bitterness. Social media has

become a place where those hurts can be massaged and nursed as you seek sympathy for yourself. Or, you can do what the Bible says and give those hurts to a crucified and resurrected Lord. The power of the living Christ enables you to forgive and move on. The power of the living Christ is what gives us power in the present and hope for the future. I can do all things and face all situations through His strength at work in me. No matter how I may feel in a given moment, my tank is never empty. My well is never dry. My spiritual resources are never depleted. Jesus is my life!

Be firm. Be faithful. Be fruitful. That is what Paul is saying in verse 58. And it is the truth of our resurrection victory in Jesus Christ that sets us at liberty to do that. He is coming again, so look up! When He does, the dead in Christ will be raised and the church will be raptured. We don't know when He's coming, but we must be ready and we must be engaged in the business He has given us to do.

Augustine — *“The last day is hidden so that every day may be regarded.”*

So I ask you the question in closing, “Are you steadfast? Are you immovable? Are you presently abounding in the work of the Lord?”