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1 Corinthians 15:50-58 “Victory over Death”

Intro. 2 Corinthians 13:4 says of Jesus, “For though he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by the power of God...” When Jesus died on the cross, almost everyone thought He was utterly defeated. The darkness of doom and despair settled over the followers of Jesus Christ. But an apparent defeat was turned into victory when He rose from the dead.

History tells us that something similar happened back in the days when Napoleon was trying to take over the world. Wellington and the British forces were going against him at Waterloo. The people of England were gathered along the English Channel, waiting for news from the battle front. Finally, a ship came into view. Then the ship began to signal the message: Wellington Defeated.... But at that moment a fog overshadowed the ship, and they did not receive the rest of the message. All along the shore they started to mourn, thinking that Wellington had been defeated. But then the fog lifted, and the ship was able to continue the rest of the message: “... the enemy at Waterloo.” What was an apparent defeat was actually a great victory [Illus.#C-1237 from Vines, 256].

Even so, Jesus Christ turned an apparent defeat into a great victory. His suffering and death, followed by His resurrection, secured for all who believe in Him forgiveness of sin, and the possibility of a new life. Thus, we can share in His victory. This morning I will share how that is possible.

Most all of us believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But if you do not believe that, I invite you to read vv. 3-11 of this chapter. The eyewitness evidence for the resurrection is overwhelming. But what does the resurrection of Christ *mean* for us? Well Paul goes on to show the relevance of the resurrection beginning in v.12. First, Paul shows that His resurrection gives assurance that our sins have been forgiven. Next, in vv.29-34, we see that His resurrection ought to affect our moral conduct. And in our text today, we see that His resurrection assures *our* victory over death. In other words, the resurrection of Christ affects our past, present, and future! Our greatest enemy is death. Life is precious but death, which is so certain, appears to end it with such finality. But the Christian faith give hope of victory over death. Now we need not fear death. So this morning I hope to be used of God to inspire you with these words of victory.

I want to bring out 3 main thoughts from our text. Because Jesus has won for us a great victory:

I. WE WILL EXPERIENCE A GREAT BODILY TRANSFORMATION

When Jesus was raised from the dead, *His* body underwent a great transformation. He obtained a body which would never die again. He could appear and disappear at will. Locked doors could not keep Him out of a room. And just as Jesus experienced a great transformation of body, even so we, too, will experience a great transformation of our bodies, whether we die or live until He returns. After all, Paul says in v. 51, “we shall all be changed.” The word translated “changed”

(*allasso*) refers to a change from one state of being to another.¹ There will be some connection from the old body to the new (cf. v.37), but the change will be quite significant. Indeed, what a change we will experience: from mortal to immortal, from weakness and pain to great power and glory!

Now I want to share a few thoughts about our hope of this great, bodily transformation. Notice from our text:

A. This Transformation Is Necessary – In v.50 Paul wrote, “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood² cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.” Our old, corruptible bodies cannot go to heaven. They are not suited for our future heavenly environment. Even Christ’s own earthly body was “flesh and blood” (Heb. 2:14) and had to be transformed before He could return to the Father in a body. Likewise, if you look at v.53, Paul emphasizes (see Gk.) that our corruptible bodies *must* be replaced with incorruptible bodies. How could these mortal bodies even survive being in the presence of God? So the bodily transformation that is spoken of here is absolutely necessary.

You see, our bodies are stained with the corruption of sin. Our bodies are mortal, subject to sickness and death. And Jesus did not come just to save our souls. He came to reverse *every* aspect of the curse of sin. Even when a believer dies, death gains a *physical* victory, in spite of our efforts to prevent it. But the day is coming when even death’s physical victory will be over. Someday Jesus will totally reverse death’s grip over our bodies. Then, these old bodies will be transformed and rise from the dust in great victory! Then, we will have brand new bodies, like unto the body of the Lord Jesus! Then, and only then, will our victory be complete! Have you ever traded your old car for a brand new car? I am glad that I am going to be able to trade my body that is growing increasingly old for a far better one, aren’t you?

You know that is what happens to a caterpillar. They are rather ugly. All they do is eat and eat. Then, at the right time they will spin themselves into a cocoon. Then after a few weeks, they will break out of the cocoon and fly away as a beautiful butterfly. What a transformation from an ugly caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly. Our bodily transformation will be even more dramatic.

Well, when is this great victory going to take place?

B. This Transformation Takes Place at the Return of Christ – In the last of v.52 Paul said this transformation will take place “at the last³ trumpet.” Likewise, 1 Th. 4:16 says, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” (Cf. also Mt. 24:31). Someday, perhaps soon, Jesus is coming back. And when He comes again, I believe that the Lord Himself will shout from heaven, calling His people to rise up to meet Him. The trumpet will also signal His return.⁴ At

¹ For example, Rom. 1:23 says, “and changed (*allasso*) the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man....”

² Currently, the life of flesh is sustained by blood (Lev. 17:11, 14). Surely that will no longer be the case with our new bodies.

³ Pretribulationists have to interpret “last” as relative, the last trumpet for Christians. Or as Ironside (p.529) says, Paul probably has in mind the practice in the Roman army of blowing the trumpet to break camp. The first blast meant, “strike tents and prepared to depart.” The second meant, “Fall into line,” and when what was called “the last trump” sounded, it meant, “March away.” However, normal interpretation calls for this to mean “last in an absolute sense.” Note use of “last” in John 6:39-40, 44, 54, 11:24, 12:48 and “trumpet” in Matt. 24:31, 1 Thess. 4:16, Rev. 10:7, 11:15, 18. The whole earth shall hear it when Christ descends from heaven; all eyes shall see him (Rev. 1:7).

⁴ It is possible that the trumpet is simply the voice of Christ, which according to Revelation 1:10-13, can sound like the blast of a trumpet.

Mt. Sinai, the trumpet was the signal of the Divine Presence. Then, whether we are still alive at the time, or if we have died, we will rise up with a new, transformed body with abilities that are beyond our imagination. Aren't you glad you are getting a new body? I sure am. I just turned 66, and I am increasingly feeling the need for a *new* body! It is exciting to know that there will be one generation of Christians who will get this new body without having to experience death. May we be that generation!

Next, Paul tells us something else interesting about our transformation. The transformation from a caterpillar to a butterfly takes weeks. But notice from our text the fact that:

C. This Transformation Will Be Instantaneous – In v.52 Paul says that this transformation will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” “Moment” is from *atomos*, from which we get the word “atom”, and denotes that which cannot be divided, the smallest conceivable quantity in the Greek language. When scientists discovered the atom, they believed that they had found the smallest particle in the universe, and so they called it an atom. Of course, we now know that we can even split an atom! So we will be changed in a split second. And to further emphasize and illustrate the speed of the change, Paul says that it will occur “in the twinkling of an eye.” Actually, the word translated “twinkling” (*rhipe*) refers to any rapid movement. The eye can move much faster than any other visible part of our bodies. So the change will be extremely rapid. Before you can say, “There He is,” you will be instantly recreated from one form to the other. Only the power of God could bring about such an instant transformation. Just think: A dear, suffering saint lying in a bed of sickness will suddenly be changed, healed forever, and rise to meet Jesus. What a wonderful hope!

So our hope regarding our bodies is God's promise of a great transformation. We will receive new bodies that are immortal, no longer subject to disease, aging and death. These bodies will have amazing new capabilities. And as a result of that great transformation, we also see in our text the fact that:

II. WE WILL ALSO EXPERIENCE A GREAT VICTORY

As Paul thinks about what will take place when Jesus comes again, he says that we will participate in the greatest victory of all time. In fact, he thinks of some Old Testament prophecies that will be fulfilled when Christ returns. He says in v.54, “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written⁵: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”⁶ That prophecy will finally be fulfilled! Then Paul says in the last of v.55, “O Hades, where is your victory?”⁷ Death is not merely destroyed so that it cannot do *further* harm, while all of the harm which it has wrought on God's children remains. No, but Death and all of its apparent victories are *reversed* for God's children. What looks like a victory for death and like a defeat for us when our bodies die and decay shall be utterly reversed so that death dies in absolute defeat and our bodies live again in absolute victory. And so Paul sees death forever conquered and sings a song of triumph over the vanquished foe.

⁵ This is in the perfect tense, “It stands written” (and continues to be true and have impact on the present).

⁶ It is interesting that in about 200 B.C., when the Jews were translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek, they translated this quote from Isaiah 25:8 as “Death, having prevailed, swallowed up men.” I suppose that the translators found it hard to believe that Death, which swallows up its victims, shall some day be swallowed up. But Paul affirms the original Hebrew.

⁷ Paul is citing the LXX translation of Hosea 13:14, “*που η δικη σου θανατε που το κεντρον σου αδη...*”

Yet right *now* death seems to be an undefeated enemy. Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychiatry, wrote, “And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.” [Illus.#C-3265]. Look at the obituaries and it seems death reigns supreme. Read or listen to the news, and it seems that death reigns supreme. Some years ago a tsunami killed over 178,000 people in just a few moments. An airliner with a capacity crowd on board collides with a small plane and plummets to the ground. When the dust and smoke settles, death walks supreme. When we take someone’s body out to the graveyard, doesn’t it seem as if death has won the victory yet again? Even children, youth, and young adults are not immune from the cold grip of death, especially in a day when fentanyl is taking so many lives. To this day death is still the enemy of man. It breaks love relationships, disrupts families, and causes great grief and heartache. We believers no longer need fear death, but it still invades and torments us while we are mortal.

Can death ever be fully defeated? Yes! Someday the conqueror called death shall itself be conquered when Jesus comes again triumphantly. And when Jesus comes again and conquers death completely, we will share in His victory and experience the following wonderful results:

A. Death Will Lose its Sting – Paul says in v.55, “O Death, where is your sting?” This sting (*kentron*) can refer either to a sharp, deadly weapon or to a poisonous sting, like that of a scorpion. The latter is more likely.

Then Paul implies why death has been conquered. He says in v.56, “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.” You see, the poison in the stinger of death is sin. If there were no sin, there would be no death, for Rom. 6:23 says, “the wages of sin is death....” (cf. Rom. 5:12). Death’s power to slay is derived from sin. But Heb. 2:9 says that Jesus “tasted death for everyone.” Now our sins can be forgiven. And since our sins have been forgiven (1 Jn. 2:12), the sting of death is already gone. Take sin away, and death is harmless for the soul of a Christian. Even the penalty of physical death will be reversed some day since sin has been dealt with by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Yes, He has removed the sting of death.

Ah, but there are those who feel that they can play around with “the sting of death” and avoid its fatal stroke. I remember when I was a boy, some of us boys in the neighborhood were playing in the woods. We found a yellow jacket hole. Have you ever seen one? Well, we decided to declare war on the yellow jacket kingdom. Only a group of *boys* would do that! They had invaded our territory, and we were going to drive them out! We rammed sticks down the hole. We cast, what was to the yellow jackets, huge boulders at them as they attempted to fly out of the nest. A few were killed in battle. Well, the battle was not going very well, so we went and got the lethal weapon: gasoline! That was pretty stupid. Anyway, we poured gasoline all over the hole and someone struck a match and in an instant we had a fire bomb! Yet as soon as the flames died down, the yellow jackets just kept coming out of the hole, and it was not long before we felt the sting of those yellow jackets!

Now that was just a game. But you know, there are people all around the earth that are playing around with the sting of death. They think they can sin, and somehow get by with it. Yet even one sin has in it the power to kill. You can play that game, but you will surely be defeated. Sin adds the poison to death’s sting. Only Jesus can remove the poison of sin. Only Jesus can remove death’s deadly stinger. Without Jesus, the painful sting of death will be felt forever.⁸

Furthermore, our great victory means that:

⁸ For the sake of time, I do not plan to deal with the relationship of the Law to sin. For further study, cf. Rom. 2:14-15; 4:15.

B. Death Is No Longer to be Feared - Christ has gone on before us. He faced death and conquered it. Just as the Ark of the Covenant went down into the Jordan River and enabled Israel to pass over safely, so Christ has gone down through the waters of death, and now we pass safely over into the shores of heaven [Illus.#C- 3266]. Jesus said, “Because I live, you shall live also” (John 14:19). Heb. 2:15 says that Jesus has released “those who through fear of death were ... subject to bondage.” Therefore, there is no longer any need to fear death.

A number of years ago, the Presbyterian Church celebrated the 100th anniversary of its mission enterprise in the Belgian Congo, which has subsequently become Zaire. Their church mission effort in that country has grown to include a medical school, a hospital and many churches. Near the end of the week-long celebration, an old man asked to make a statement. He said, “I know that I will soon die, but there is something on my heart that I must tell you about.” He explained that when the first white missionaries came to the Congo, they did not know whether to believe them or their message, so they devised a plan. They secretly poisoned the missionaries and watched them die. They wanted to see how they died. One by one the deaths began to occur. The missionaries, even their children, died and were buried in Zaire. You can go there and see the cemeteries and the aging gravestones. It was when the people saw how they faced death that they were convinced that they could believe the message that they had come to share.⁹

Yes, Jesus has given us victory over the fear of death. And unless Jesus comes again first, you will face death. Will you face it with fear? Will your loved ones be left in despair over what has happened to you? Have you heard the expression, “Death’s door”? For many years death has been referred to as a door through which we must pass into eternity. Will we pass through that door with fear, or will we pass that door by faith in God and His Word? Psalm 116:15 states; “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” Most would not perceive this door of death as being precious. The key to understanding and receiving comfort is found in the words; “in the sight of the Lord.” God sees the “door of death” from *His* side. Beyond the door lies all of heaven basking in the glory of God. The door is precious in His sight because it is the entrance that His children use to come see Him. If it is precious to God, it can be precious to us and our perception of “the door” loses all fear. [Wayne Nix, Illus.#C-793].

Isn’t it wonderful that death has lost its sting, and now we can no longer fear death? What a victory over death we now have!

Now let’s move on to my final point. Since we will experience a great transformation and a great victory:

III. WE SHOULD HAVE A GREAT RESPONSE TO GOD

As Paul thinks about our past, present, and future victory, he cannot help but respond the way he does in vv. 57-58. And I want to challenge you to respond to these wonderful promises of victory in the same way.

A. We Should Respond with Thanksgiving – That is what Paul does in v.57, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the original Greek Paul places the emphasis on “God.” “Thanks be to *God*....” No sinful man has ever conquered death apart from the intervention of God. Doctors can delay death but they can’t conquer it! The only way you

⁹ Illus.#C-364: Leith Anderson, *Winning The Values War: Thirteen Distinct Values That Mark a Follower of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 198.

can experience victory over death is through the power of God. Notice also it is a present tense, “gives” not “will give” [literally “the one giving”]. We already have victory over death *now*! Thus Paul not only speaks about what God will do at a future time but about what He does now and does continually. We already experience victory over death! Even at the moment of death we have victory, for death is instantly changed to life in heaven! Soul sleep is a false doctrine. Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:8 that “absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord.” Notice again in v.57 that He “gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” He removed our sin by receiving the sting of death, satisfying God’s holy wrath against sin with a perfect sacrifice. He conquered death by being raised from the dead. So He is the One who made this victory possible.

Do you believe that you will rise from the dead some day? Do you believe that Christ has given you eternal life? How can we do anything but thank and praise God for what He has done for us through His Son Jesus? He has promised us an imperishable, glorious, and powerful body for one that is perishable, dishonorable, and weak. We know these promises are assured because He has already given us victory over sin and death. For Christians death has no more power. For Christians death is but the passing of our spirits from this life to the next, the leaving of earth and going to be with Christ (cf. Phil. 1:23-24).¹⁰

Do you frequently express gratitude to our Lord Jesus for what He has done for you? You should! Not only should we express gratitude to God, but:

B. We Should Also Respond with a Steadfast Commitment to Christ – In v.58 he said in conclusion, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable....” This chapter indicates that the great doctrines of Christianity were being attacked by many unbelievers in Corinth. But with such a great gospel, we should be steadfast and unmovable. These words carry the idea of being settled and firmly situated. Now Paul is not talking about being stubborn and unwilling to change *within* the will of God. He is speaking about being unmovable concerning moving *out* of the will of God. Our commitment to Jesus Christ and His Church should be unshakeable. We are to be steadfast and immovable because our faith is in the rock-solid truths of the Word of God, and the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Eph. 4:14 says that we are not to be like children, tossed about by every wind of doctrine. So in a day of increasing apostasy from the Christian faith, we should be steadfast and immovable in our commitment to the gospel of Christ and the Word of God. Now that Jesus has most certainly risen from the death and given us victory, don’t ever allow the doubts of a skeptic to shake your faith in Jesus. We are to have settled convictions and a firm faith. Even threats of death should not move us one inch from our commitment to Jesus, for we no longer fear death. Victory is assured. We are also to be steadfast and immovable in regard to temptation. And don’t allow some tragedy that comes into your life to shake your faith in Jesus.

Are you steadfast and unmovable in your commitment to Jesus Christ? Furthermore, out of gratitude to God:

C. We Should Respond by Serving the Lord – This is one primary way we *show* our gratitude to our Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹

Now I conclude by sharing with you 3 thoughts about our service to the Lord.

1. Our Service Should Be Continual – Notice in v.58 that we should be “*always* abounding in the work of the Lord.” There are fair weather Christians who serve the Lord when the

¹⁰ And when Jesus returns, there will be no more pain, or sorrow, or death (Rev. 20:14; 21:4).

¹¹ Notice it is the work “of the Lord.” Paul is not talking about mere church work. You can do a lot of activity in the average church and still never get around to doing the work of the Lord.

conditions are right, when things are going well, but the Bible says we should *always* serve the Lord. There are seasonal Christians who worship and serve the Lord at special seasons of the year. Then there are those who say they will serve the Lord while they are young to middle age, but they quit when they get older. No, such a great victory should cause us to serve the Lord always, as long as we have life and strength. In youth and in old age; in pleasant as well as in somber days; when many work with us, and even when few work with us, either way, we are to always serve the Lord.

2. Our Service Should Be Abundant – Again, in v.58 we see that we should be “always *abounding* in the work of the Lord.” Because God has so abundantly blessed us, we should determine to overdo ourselves in service to Him, to whom we owe everything. And the good thing is that Jesus is alive to work in and through us, giving us strength and direction. We have a rich resource for abundant service.

What a word Paul gives to the countless Christians who work and pray and give as *little* as they can! Leisure and relaxation have become two great modern idols, to which many Christians seem quite willing to bow down. In proper proportion recreation and rest can help restore our energy and increase our effectiveness. But they also can easily become ends in themselves. More than one believer has relaxed and hobbled himself completely out of the work of the Lord. How can we “take it easy” when so many around us need to be rescued from spiritual death? How can we do so little when so many fellow believers are in need of edification, encouragement, and help of every sort? When can a Christian say, “I’ve served my time, I’ve done my part; let others do the work now?” God tells us that we can rest from our labors when we get to heaven (Rev. 14:13). Until then, let us invest our time, energy, talents, gifts, and money into the work of the Lord.

Finally:

3. Our Service Should Be Highly Motivated – Paul says in the last of v.58, “...knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” The word translated “labor” (*kopos*) refers to hard labor to the point of exhaustion. Have you ever worked like that for the Lord? If so, why would you work so hard, probably for no pay at all? And who can work hard and well if he thinks it is all in vain? How many times have you worked hard on a project or in a business and then realized it was all in vain? Yet when you work for the Lord, it is *not* in vain, for you know with confidence that there is eternal life and reward beyond the grave. Every good work believers do in this life has eternal benefits that the Lord Himself guarantees. He said in Rev. 22:12, “behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward [is] with Me...” For every hour you spend preparing and teaching that S.S. lesson or singing in the choir, you will be rewarded. Every time you work with our precious children in the nursery, Children’s Church, or AWANA, or Bible School, or S.S., or the Children’s Committee, you are adding to your heavenly reward. When you help carry out the mission of your committee, your labor is not in vain. And when the labor is ended, the laborer will not stand there with empty hands.

Conclusion: So through the saving work of Jesus Christ, we will experience a great bodily transformation. We will experience a great victory over death. And we should greatly respond with gratitude, commitment, and service to the Lord. Do you realize what God has done and will do for you? Are you responding in the way Paul says here? If not, I encourage you to thank God right now. Renew your commitment to a steadfast faith now. Renew your service to the Lord now. And if you do not have assurance of victory over death, then I invite you to repent of your sins and put your faith in Jesus. He took the dagger of death for you, conquered death, and can give you eternal life. Receive it today!

Sources: Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2023; H.A. Ironside, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1938); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: I Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983); Spiros Zodhiates, *Conquering the Fear of Death: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 808-809, 817-833 only. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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