

XXXII. Sing a Song of Victory!

April 15/17, 2014

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Aim: To rejoice in the surety of our resurrection at Christ's Second Coming, to be comforted by the doctrine of the resurrection, and to be fruitful in service while awaiting the resurrection.

There can be little doubt that Paul's opponents in Corinth saw the physical and spiritual in direct contrast, if not conflict, with each other. The more obviously supernatural gifts, such as tongues, were most highly valued in the congregation precisely because they were evidence of a spiritual reality beyond the physical. If these gifts were a foretaste of the world to come, and of true spirituality, then it seemed as if the body must be the chief hindrance to the realization of heaven. They could choose to deny the body, or indulge the body, but neither affected the spiritual reality of seeking to escape from the body, in order to set the immortal soul free from its prison-house of clay. Clearly, all such views were only so many compromises with the philosophical ideas of Greek culture. The apostle has consistently sought to correct them during the course of the letter.

The Corinthians had apparently equated the resurrection of the body with the physical resuscitation of the body and couldn't comprehend how mere physical bodies could inhabit eternity. When Paul talked about the resurrection, he had more than resuscitation in mind. In this passage, he addresses the great change that will occur when we are resurrected. He deals both with the character of this change and the comfort that flows from it.

In concluding chapter 15, Paul proclaims the marvelous victory that resurrection will bring for those who are Christ's. Paul's concluding 'victory song' has been put to music in such masterpieces as Handel's *Messiah* and Brahms' *Requiem*, and in many ways it is more appropriate to be sung than preached. Praising God in anticipation of resurrection, the apostle proclaims the great transformation, the great triumph, and the great thanksgiving that the raising of God's saints will bring, and then gives a great exhortation for holy living until that day comes.

A. Our Future Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50-57)

1. The Great Transformation (15:50-53)

a) *Why?* (15:50)

⁵⁰*I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*

In verse 50, Paul does affirm that major changes have to take place before the life of the kingdom of God can be experienced and enjoyed in its fullness. We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pe. 3:13). It is in view of that new environment of a redeemed creation, that the changes Paul now focuses on must take place, in each one of Christ's redeemed people.

Paul readily admits that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.' 'Flesh and blood,' though wonderfully suited for earth, is not at all suited for heaven. 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. Yes, the physical body will be raised, but it will also be changed. The resurrected body

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will have continuity with the physical body, but it will be as superior to it as the plant is to the seed.

In the New Testament, ‘flesh and blood’ stand for the physical frame rather than man’s sinful nature. The human frame is not pictured as a normally healthy thing that is prone to corruption; it is essentially ‘corruption’: every fiber of our being is rotteness. Juxtaposed to this is ‘the kingdom of God,’ a dominion which is not said to be incorruptible; rather it is ‘incorruptibility’: the King, His people, and their habitat are holy and eternal.

In short, ‘flesh and blood,’ those who are ‘of dust,’ the ‘perishable,’ cannot *un-transformed* inherit the Kingdom of God. The body that belonged to this age must be changed prior to its entry into the coming age. They are wide of the mark who claim that since ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom,’ therefore the resurrection is not a resurrection of *the body*. On this premise they conclude that neither Christ’s resurrection in the past nor ours in the future is a bodily resurrection. But in no way is Paul saying this. On the contrary, ‘flesh and blood’ describes human mortality that is dust-like and perishable. The resurrected body is a true body but it is a *transformed* ‘flesh and blood,’ an ‘imperishable’ body.

b) *Who? (15:51)*

⁵¹*Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed...*

The semi-technical term of ‘mystery’ in the apostolic vocabulary signifies a secret that God has chosen to reveal, which could never have been guessed at, let alone understood, unless God had disclosed it (cp. 1 Th. 4:15). This is entirely in accord with the argument of the chapter that it is a foolish mistake to judge what God will do by our present perceptions or thinking power.

In the New Testament ‘mystery’ always refers to that which had before been hidden and unknown but which is now revealed. The apostle now reveals that Christians who are alive when the Lord returns will not have to die (‘sleep’) in order for their bodies to be changed (cp. 1 Th. 4:17). Whether believers die or are alive when Christ returns, their bodies will be changed from the perishable to imperishable, from the natural to the spiritual. Since the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable, Enoch and Elijah must have been changed in the same way before their translation to heaven.

‘We’ does not suggest that Paul anticipated remaining in this world until Christ’s arrival: sometimes he associated himself with future expectations without stating that he personally would live to see their realization (cp. 13:12). His thesis is that because none can enter eternity with natural bodies, ‘all’ are to be ‘altered.’ The ‘dead,’ the saints of both old and new covenants whose bodies had reverted to dust will be raised together. Further, those who are alive will experience the immediate transformation of their still living bodies: ‘and we [the survivors] shall be altered.’

Christians have traditionally referred to death as ‘sleep,’ partly because it is the bodily state we know which is most akin to death, but more importantly because it includes within it the idea of waking. If you are asleep and not going to wake up, then you are unarguably dead! But death for the believer is sleep, at least from the point of the inactive, perishable body. The spirit, however, has departed to be with Christ, which is ‘far better’ (Phil. 1:23), ‘away from the body and at home with the Lord’ (2 Cor. 5:8).

However, on the resurrection morning the body will awake and be reunited with its departed spirit, in all the glorious transformation of the new creation (see 1 Th. 4:16-17). This is when the

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harvest of resurrection life will be seen springing up from all the seeds that have been sown as Christians have been buried or cremated down the centuries. It is for this reason that churchyards were often called ‘God’s acre’ – the piece of land where His seeds of perishable bodies have been planted. All that was sown in perishability will now be raised to inherit the imperishable kingdom.

The word ‘sleep’ was, of course, the early Christian’s favorite expression for death. Jesus Himself used this term (John 11:11). So when Paul says we shall all not sleep, he means not all Christians are going to die! All Christians are going to receive a glorified body, but some will receive it without having to go through death. Who are these people? They are the Christians who are alive when Jesus Christ returns to this earth. When Jesus comes, these people will simply be ‘scooped up’ by Him, and they will receive their glorified bodies in the process of that ‘scooping’! (cp. 1 Th. 4:16-17).

c) *How? (15:52a)*

⁵² *...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...*

The words ‘in a moment’ are translated from *en atomō* (literally, ‘in an atom’ – that is, something too tiny to be cut) which where we get our word ‘atom’; it denotes that which cannot be cut, or divided, the smallest conceivable quantity. This word indicates that the change is going to take place in just a particle of time. In the smallest possible amount of time our perishable bodies will be made imperishable.

Rhipē (‘twinkling’) literally means to hurl, and was used to refer to any rapid movement. The ‘eye’ can move much faster than any other visible part of our bodies, and Paul’s point was that the change will be extremely fast, instantaneous. It will take no longer than it takes the eye to blink. God’s irresistible power is such that we, whether dead or alive, will be changed immediately.

Paul is referring to a specific future event, a moment in time which we might describe as marking the end of time as we know it, and the beginning of eternity. This instantaneous and totally miraculous transformation reveals the limitless power and sovereign authority of the only living and true God.

d) *When? (15:52b)*

...at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound...

The ‘last trumpet’ is the trumpet that is going to sound when the Lord Jesus Christ returns (1 Th. 4:16). The trumpet has always been associated with festive occasions, and no occasion could possibly be more festive than when the Lord returns to take His people home.

Paul is not speculating what will happen but is expanding on Jesus’ own revelation of the end times (cp. Mt. 24:31). Trumpets make a loud and piercing sound and were employed as signals in ancient battles (cp. 14:8). The prophets speak of the ‘last trumpet’ as announcing the end, God’s final moment of intervention (Zech. 9:14; Is. 27:13). Jesus’ reference is repeated by both Paul and John (1 Th. 4:16; Rev. 8:2).

e) *What? (15:52c-53)*

...and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³*For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*

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The perishable body preserves a degree of continuity in that it ‘puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality.’ This change that all must submit to is spoken metaphorically as clothing. The word translated ‘put on’ was commonly used of putting on clothing, and pictures our redeemed spirits being dressed redeemed bodies (cp. 2 Cor. 5:1-5). Both those believers who have died, and those who are still alive at Christ’s coming, are thus totally transformed and receive their resurrection bodies to enable them to live in the new order.

Resurrection is inevitable, because it is essential, the operative word being ‘must.’ This transformation amounts to corruptible, mortal bodies being transformed into incorruptible, immortal bodies. The physical body is corruptible and mortal. It dies and decays. There can be no place in heaven for such a body (cp. Pe. 1:4). A body that is capable of dying and decaying just would not fit in there. The only body suited for such a place is one that has been clothed in immortality and one that is beyond the taint of corruption. The change Paul is talking about is one that ideally suits this body for that world.

2. The Great Triumph (15:54-56)

Before Paul closes this part of the letter, he emphasizes the comfort or confidence that flows from the change awaiting the children of God (15:54-58). He does the same thing in his letter to the Thessalonians (cp. 1 Th. 4:18).

a) *The Death of Death (15:54-55)*

(1) Isaiah 25:8 (15:54)

⁵⁴*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.”

‘Immortality’ (*athanasia*) signifies eternal blessedness. Strictly speaking, immortality and eternity are not the same. Whereas the former implies quality, the latter signifies duration, which is why Scripture speaks about eternal rather than immortal judgment. The fact that the condemned are not said to be immortal does not mean that they face obliteration.

The full implications of this sudden, irreversible, and miraculous transformation are spelt out at the end of verse 54, when the promise of Isaiah 25:8 is now, at last brought to fulfillment: ‘He will swallow up death forever.’ This is of course, exactly what the resurrection of the Lord Jesus proclaims. Death no longer has any power over Him. Resurrection is a conquest of death and spells its total defeat.

Paul’s words ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ (cp. 2 Cor. 5:4) speak of ‘battle’ and reminds us of his earlier reference to death as ‘the last enemy’ (v. 26). Here the apostle echoes Isaiah 25:8. This Old Testament verse appears in a mini-apocalypse (Is. 24:1-27:13) expounding the sovereignty of Yahweh in both judgment and salvation. Because death and its attendant miseries have covered all men (Is. 25:7), Israel’s God will swallow up the veil of death, yet on behalf of ‘His people’ (Is. 25:8); universal salvation is not predicted. When the last trumpet is sounded for the last battle God will be victorious over the last enemy. God will stand victorious with Death at His feet, defeated forever.

(2) Hosea 13:14 (15:55)

⁵⁵*“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”*

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What Christ's resurrection has proclaimed as the firstfruits (vv. 20, 23) is now accomplished by the harvest of all His resurrected people, and death's destruction is sealed, as God has always promised, Paul here quoting Hosea 13:14.

With the taunt of an amended quotation from Hosea 13:14 upon his lips, and in light of the resurrection of Christ and the expected resurrection of the church, Paul ridicules mortality. The first half of Hosea 13:14 promises that Yahweh will ransom His people from the power of Sheol and redeem them from death. By 'Sheol' is meant the abode of the dead generally, a situation in which the people of God will not remain. The second half shows that, having effected this resurrection God exults in the spectacle of the downfall of death. Paul is confident that upon the Lord's return, the promise of Hosea 13:14 will be honored.

Paul flings two challenges at Death who, until now, always defeated every man and woman in history. Death is like a schoolyard bully before whom other children cowered, until a Stronger one came along and defeated him, giving all others freedom and hope. At the last day Death will be finally vanquished.

The 'sting' (*kentron*) was a poisonous and painful sting as of a scorpion or snake. Naturally we dread pain at death, whether the last throes of cancer or heart failure. Rightly we apply palliative care for those in such pain. Although *kentron* can also mean 'goad' (cp. Acts 26:14), the sense here is that death is excruciatingly painful: it stings. To continue with the metaphor, Paul implies that death left its sting in Christ, as a bee leaves its stinger in its victim. Christ bore the whole of death's sting in order that we would have to bear none of it.

As Paul thinks about that glorious instant of transformation for both the dead and the living, he can't help but taunt death itself. Death has played a monstrous role in each of our lives. It has deprived us of our loved ones, many of them taken well before their time. It has terrorized us, tyrannized us, and caused our feeble hearts to tremble. It has diminished our joys, casting a dark cloud over our happiest moments. But on that glorious day, it will finally be beaten once and for all, never to terrorize or tyrannize again.

b) *The Sting of Death (15:56a)*

⁵⁶*The sting of death is sin...*

Do you understand why death has been able to conduct such a reign of terror? Paul gives us the answer. The sting of death is the anguish, the fear, the terror we feel in the face of death. What causes this anxiety and dread? Paul says it is sin. His point is not just that sin brought death into this world, but it is sin that gives death its power to terrorize us. Why? Each of us intuitively knows he must stand before a holy God and give account of himself and his sins, and that is such an awesome thought we cannot help but shrink from it.

Paul, however, is speaking of another pain at death. This is the 'sting' of unforgiven sins, sins which are shown for what they are by God's law, His ten commandments. Such is our innate rebellion against God that His law, which is good, has actually inspired and inflamed our evil behavior (see Rom. 7:7-25). What is the ultimate pain of Death? It is to die unforgiven.

To make his point, the apostle reminds his readers that 'the sting of death is sin.' The harm in death is caused by sin; in fact, death itself is caused by sin. Death is not gone yet, but for the Christian, its sting, sin, is gone. It is not, of course, that Christians no longer sin, but that the sins we commit are already covered by Christ's atoning death, so that sin's effect is not permanently fatal. But for those who do not believe, death's sting tragically remains forever.

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c) The Power of Sin (15:56b)

...and the power of sin is the law.

But where does sin get its ability to terrorize us through death? Paul says, ‘The strength of sin is the law.’ Paul is talking about the law of God. He is not suggesting that the law in any way promotes sin. The law expresses the holy character of God, so it could not possibly encourage sin. But the law does state that death is the penalty for sin. Sin seizes on that pronouncement of condemnation and uses it against us. Every time we break God’s law, sin whispers in our ear, ‘You deserve to die!’

Power has been given to death because of the universal problem of human sin. It is because of this that death is able to rule, as a tyrant, over the whole human race. It is by the law of God, which is itself the expression of God’s perfect righteousness, that sin is defined, and we are pronounced guilty. God’s law reveals God’s standards, and when they are broken they reveal man’s sin. Men die because they break that law. Indeed, such is the perversity of human nature that the law which is holy and just actually provokes our further rebellion against God, as we resist His commands and refuse to submit to His rules in our lives.

3. The Great Thanksgiving (15:57)

⁵⁷*But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

On the cross, dying as our representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, offered His perfect life of obedience to the Father in the place of our rebellious hearts and wills, carried our punishment, and made atonement for our sins. He conquered our death by drawing sin’s sting and satisfying the law’s just demands, and in so doing opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

The glory of the gospel is that Jesus Christ came to receive the penalty for our sins and to fulfill the law of God perfectly. When He finally comes to rapture His waiting people, this gloomy triad of death, sin, and the law will have absolutely no more hold over us. The truth is that we don’t have to wait until that day to raise a chorus of praise to the Savior. Even now we can take Paul’s words as our own: ‘Thanks to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

‘Giving’ is in the present tense and implies that for Christians there are two movements operating in tandem: at the same time as this world is steadily being reduced to nothing, the people of God are drawing ever nearer to their final triumph.

Paul gives thanks to the One who will give us the great transformation of our bodies and who has made the great triumph over sin and death. That which we could never do for ourselves God has done for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot live sinlessly and thereby fulfill the law, nor can we remove sin once we have committed it, or remove its consequence, which is death. But on our behalf Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, fulfilling the law; removed our sin by Himself paying the penalty for it, satisfying God with a perfect sacrifice; and conquered death by being raised from the dead. All of that great victory He has accomplished for us and given to us. He took our curse and our condemnation (cp. Gal 3:13) and gives us victory in their place.

How can we do anything but thank and praise God for what He has done for us? He has promised us an imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual body for one that is perishable, dishonorable, weak, and natural. He promises us the heavenly in exchange for the earthly, the

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immortal in exchange for the mortal. We know these promises are assured because He has already given us victory over sin and death. In Christ's victory over death, death's sting is removed; it is declawed, defanged, disarmed, destroyed.

God has given to us the victory of eternal life, through what the Lord Jesus accomplished for us in His cross and resurrection. The empty tomb and the risen Lord, with which this chapter began, are the ultimate proof of the fact that Christ's victory is total and final. All our enemies – the law, sin, and death – are conquered forever. No wonder Paul bursts into praise and thanksgiving, as he considers the scale of this victory and the immeasurable benefits that flow from it to every one of God's redeemed people! Yet none of this would be so, he has reminded his foolish Corinthian readers, if there is no resurrection from the dead (vv. 12-18).

B. Our Current Response (1 Corinthians 15:58)

What comfort and confidence the resurrection body gives us for the future! But does the resurrection of the body have any help to offer us for there and now? Indeed it does! Paul indicates that reflecting on the reality of the future glory should yield two results in the here and now: it should make us firmly faithful and abundantly fruitful.

1. Firmly Faithful (15:58a)

⁵⁸*Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable...*

The certainty of this glorious future must animate and motivate the believer to live here and now in the light of eternity. 'Therefore,' says Paul, in the light of all that lies ahead of us, apply all its implications to your present discipleship and service. We are to live now, but always in the light of the future, as citizens of heaven but fully engaged in the Master's service in this world.

Being *firmly faithful* means we are 'steadfast' and 'immovable.' We are not to be like the Corinthians who were carried about by the latest fads of their culture and who were, therefore, constantly yearning to adjust and modify Christianity to fit the times. Instead of being thermometers that register the temperature, Christians are to be the thermostats that regulate it!

Paul exhorts them to 'be steadfast' (*hedraioi*, literally, 'firmly seated'), immovable (*ametakinētoi*, literally, 'unshaken'). They must not be moved from their firm foundations of the faith by the folly of doubters among them.

Hedraios ('steadfast') literally refers to being seated, and therefore to being settled and firmly situated. *Ametakinētos* ('immovable') carries the same basic idea but with more intensity. It denotes being totally immobile and motionless. Obviously Paul is talking about our being moved *away from* God's will, not to our being moved *within* it.

Because God's final plans are clear and settled and because nothing can shake them, we are to be equally immovable, firmly rooted in the Person and work of our crucified, risen, ascended, and coming King, and not allowing ourselves to be blown off course, or uprooted, by whatever hurricanes of skepticism and unbelief we may encounter.

2. Fully Fruitful (15:58b)

...always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

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In addition to being faithful, we shall also be *abundantly fruitful*. The word ‘abounding refers to being excessively, superfluously rich. In other words, Christians are to be really wealthy in their works.

Perisseuō (‘abounding’) carries the idea of exceeding the requirements, of overflowing or overdoing. In Ephesians 1:7-8 the word is used of God’s *lavishing* on us ‘the riches of His grace.’ Because God has so abundantly overdone Himself for us who deserve nothing from Him, we should determine to overdo ourselves (if that were possible) in service to Him, to whom we owe everything.

Think of those two words ‘always’ and ‘abounding.’ What a goal they provide for us to aim for. Now is the time for work and labor, and as time is the only one of Gods gifts that is continually decreasing, we cannot afford to be anything other than purposefully centered on the Lord’s work. Such activity is ‘not in vain,’ because it has eternal value and reward.

We are partners with our great God who has won the victory over sin and death and who will share the fruits of that victory with us at the end. Our ‘work’ (*ergon*) and ‘toil’ (*kopos*) done in His name will never be wasted, since it was done in the light of the reality of the eternal kingdom of God.

The theme of the letter is that true spirituality centers on the self-sacrificing love of the crucified Savior, and that we are called to tread the same pathway. Here is the ultimate incentive to sacrificial service, such as Paul constantly demonstrated. The outcome of all the suffering, work, and labor is the victory of the resurrection and the everlasting life that Christ has purchased for us. It is because we cannot lose, that nothing we do in the work of this gracious, victorious Lord can ever be in vain.

Paul concludes his discussion of the resurrection with some very practical words and demonstrates in so doing that Christianity is not just a nice, neat set of doctrines for the mind. If we really gasp for the doctrines of Christianity, we shall reflect it in our lives.

Paul brings to a conclusion his majestic pastoral sermon on the resurrection of the dead. It was made necessary by the doubters and deniers among the Corinthians who were disputing the resurrection of the dead at the end of history in favor of some alternative doctrine. Paul, however, does more than rebut their erroneous teaching. He shows how the historical reality of the resurrection of Christ, on which the church is founded, demands the future resurrection of those who belong to Christ. Indeed, none of the fundamental benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection have any meaning or content if this teaching is overturned.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-12.