

“Ministry Diversity and the Centrality of Christ in the Local Assembly”
Issues of Theology - Understanding the Resurrection

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Title: “The Day Death Died and Hope was Born”
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
Theme:

Introduction:

Scripture does not allow us to simply examine it without recognizing the intimate and personal nature of it. The Bible is not simply information. There is a God who comforts us in our loss and encourages us in our struggles. It is the hope of God making all things right that pushes us to endure the injustice of living in a fallen world. There is coming a day when the full disclosure of heaven on earth will be played out before our eyes.

ILLUSTRATION:

The story is told of a three-year old who grew up without religious influence and had never heard the name of God spoken.

The little one asked her father, "Where does the world come from?" He responded with a secularized theory of the origins of the world but added, "However, there are those who say that all this comes from a very powerful being and they call that being God." His daughter joyously exclaimed, "I knew what you told me wasn't true; it is God, it is God!"

<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1992/v49-1-article5.htm>

Philip Yancey notes how,

"We dare not confine theology to seminary coffee shops where professors and students play mental badminton. It affects all of us." (Yancey, Philip: *Disappointment with God. Three Questions No One Asks Aloud*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988]).

It is my theology of God and His world that causes every pleasurable sensation to have an eternal significance and every painful moment to make sense.

Our present danger:

Although the text speaks of the truth to be told as a mystery, let us not assume that it cannot be known or that it does not have any direct and immediate impact on our lives. We live in a very pragmatic culture where truth is defined by what works or makes us feel good or better about ourselves. The Scripture is often viewed as being anything but pragmatic. We see its teaching and our Lord as spiritual and ethereal and thus almost mythical and unreal. This is to our shame. The Bible in all of its parts, contributing to the whole, is down-to-earth and thus sensible on a daily level.

There is an unavoidable encounter that all of us must face. Listen to the following description:

“There is a preacher of the old school but he speaks as boldly as ever. He is not popular, though the world is his parish and 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 you will be his sermon.” (quoted in John F. MacArthur, *First Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1984], 441-442).

The eternal view:

“We fear death. It debilitates us. Our lives slowly slip away before our eyes with little achieved. Our dreams are great, but the limitations of our shell seem to undermine all we ever hoped for. Unrealized dreams, shattered expectations, compounded by the inevitable decline in energy and the ever gathering cloud of death. Always a powerful victor with the sting of a deadly serpent. Always driving us to possess life, as though the passing of time was something that could be possessed. Like grasping at the wind, we deny our mortality in the flitting fancies of a fading light.” <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/sunday8ce.html>

The death of death in the death of the Savior is finalized at the resurrection of all things. He has triumphed and will triumph and His victory is our victory. It is because of this that we can endure and abound in obedience as the kingdom of God advances toward its final installment.

“Paul brings this marvelous treatment of a difficult subject to a dramatic climax. No passage of Scripture perhaps has been more frequently read beside the open grave, than has this one. These wonderful words of comfort and encouragement have brought new strength, courage, and hope to unnumbered hosts. As long as time shall last, Christians around the world will cherish them for their classic beauty, simplicity, insight, and great power.” (Millard J. Berquist, *Studies in First Corinthians*, 129)

There are three movements within this one paragraph that help unpack the primary idea.

BIG IDEA: Our God does reign over sin and death and His victory leads us in triumph over it.

Paul begins by noting the problem in verse 50.

I. An opening exclamation - the problem stated (v. 50)

⁵⁰ “Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50).

A. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God

B. The perishable cannot inherit the imperishable

If we remain as we are, we will not be able to inherit the kingdom of God. This is the consistent witness of all Scripture. The two statements within verse 50 are parallel statements. Flesh and blood are perishable and the kingdom of God is imperishable. Unless something happens that would significantly alter what we are, we would never make it into the imperishable kingdom of God. Verses 51 and following offer a solution to this inherent problem.

The statement “cannot” uses a negative plus the word “power or ability to accomplish a stated task or goal.” It is the word from which we get our English word “dynamite.” There is necessity behind the change that is to take place. If God did not intervene, then all hope would be lost. We would live an existence that would be marked by a darkness that consumes. It is a tragedy unparalleled, but many within our world live in such darkness on a daily basis.

“Man, in his present state, cannot inherit the kingdom of God; his nature is not suited to that place; he could not, in his present weak state, endure an exceeding great and eternal weight of glory. Therefore, it is necessary that he should die, or be changed; that he should have a celestial body suited to the celestial state.” (Adam Clarke’s Commentary)

This leads us to our second movement within the paragraph. Verses 51 through 53 offer a solution to the problem stated in verse 50.

II. A startling summons - the solution offered (vv. 51 - 53)

⁵¹ “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² 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 will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

A. It is a mystery

The mystery is that not everyone will experience physical death. A biblical mystery is something that was previously not disclosed but is now being disclosed.

As a mystery, truth is being disclosed, but the answer will not be exhaustive. There are still some things we do not know. Yet the information we do have is sufficient to meet the challenges of the moment and silence the voice of doubt that dwells within. The most important thing is that what we are is going to be significantly altered. We are going to exchange perishable for imperishable, dishonor for glory, weakness for power, and the natural for the spiritual. Who in this audience can testify to the unstoppable decay of your present existence? How many of us have watched loved one perish from day to day and week to week? We are living monuments to the inevitable decline of all living things. Yet there is coming a day of great and glorious change.

B. It involves change

The word change in verses 51 and 52 speak of something that is similar but different.

ILLUSTRATION:

If I held up before you two apples and one was a Golden Delicious and the other was a Macintosh, I would say that both of them are the same, but different. They are both apples although slightly different. If I held up an apple and a rock, the only thing they would have in common is that they are both created items. The word the Spirit uses to describe the change from perishable to imperishable is the word we would use to describe the differences between a Golden Delicious and a Macintosh. Our previous paragraph (vv. 35-49) assures us that what we are in this life is similar to what we will become in the resurrection, but different.

“After the change we will never again return to the manner of life then being lived. The living shall be robed in deathlessness, or immortality, and the dead shall be robed in incorruption.” (Millard J. Berquist, Studies in First Corinthians, 130)

There are three qualifiers concerning this change.

1. Not everyone will die (v. 51).

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51).

Not everyone will die, but everyone will experience transformation. If we are fortunate to be alive when the Lord returns, we will be changed without having to experience death.

“The ‘we’ implies that Christians in that age and every successive age since and hereafter were designed to stand waiting, as if Christ might come again in their time.” (Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown)

Paul lived in light of an imminent return. He lived for the eternal in a world that is temporal. **If Jesus returned today, would you be at all disappointed that you missed out on something? What are you clutching in your hands that His return would force you to give up?** It is disastrous that we are so distracted by the temporal that we lose sight of the eternal. I say this to all of our embarrassment.

Both ideas of not everyone dying and the summoning via a trumpet blast are contained in the 1 Thessalonians 4:15 passage.

2. It involves a summoning via a trumpet blast (v. 52)

“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 will be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52)

God often uses the symbolism of a trumpet to inaugurate His actions. See also Matthew 24:31. John 5:25 perhaps suggests that this trumpet is very much the voice of God.

³⁰ “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. ³¹ And He will send forth His angels with **A GREAT TRUMPET** and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” (Matt. 24:30, 31).

²⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, **when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.** ²⁶ For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; ²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹ and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:25-29).

“The word ‘last’ here does not imply that any trumpet shall have been before sounded at the resurrection, but is a word denoting that this is the consummation or close of things; it will end the economy of this world; it will be connected with the last state of things.” (Albert Barnes’ New Testament Commentary)

3. The change will be instantaneous (vv. 52-53)

⁵² “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 will be changed. ⁵³

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:52, 53).

“The Greek word translated ‘moment’ is *atomos*, from which is derived the English word *atom*, meaning originally, ‘that which is indivisible.’ The ‘twinkling of an eye’ is not the blinking of the eyelid but the reflection of light by the eye.” (Alfred Martin, 1 Corinthians, 141)

This particular phrase is used. . .

“Only here in N.T. [It was] used by the Greeks for the flapping of a wing, the buzz of a gnat, the quivering of a harp, [and] the twinkling of a star.” (Robertson’s Word Pictures)

The statement “put on” means to be. . .

“Fully clothed with a new body, to die no more.” (Adam Clarke’s Commentary)

This leads us to our third movement within the paragraph.

III. A triumphant cry – the death of death (vv. 54-56)

⁵⁴ “But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. ⁵⁵ ‘O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’ ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor. 15:54-56).

It will signify the end of sin’s reign (vv. 54b-56). These words are a quotation from Isaiah 25:8. There is coming a day when the sting of sin shall forever be lost.

“Death has as yet *a sting* even to the believer, in that his *body* is to be under its power till the resurrection. But then the sting and power of death shall cease for ever.” (Jamieson, Fausett, and Brown)

“The deadly sting which brought death upon us was sin. Christ's victory over death shows he is also victor over sin in the "now". Sin was put to death on the cross, and it is put to death in our lives in our dying with Christ. In Christ, no longer are we guilty - sin can no longer condemn us. In Christ, no longer are we a slave to sin - sin's power is broken through the renewing work of the indwelling Christ.” <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/sunday8ce.html>

The saints of God will glory over the conquest of death as one does a defeated foe, a vanquished enemy. Notice the nature of the two questions asked in our text.

A. O death where is thy victory?

“The answer to the first question is that the temporary victory of death has been cancelled. The believer is at last the victor.” (Millard J. Berquist, Studies in First Corinthians, 130)

B. O death where is thy sting?

“It is sin alone that makes life hard” . . . and it is the Law that makes men conscious of sin. It is only the grace of God and the triumph of Christ that makes men free from sin and death.

“If there were no sin, there would be no death. Man's transgression of the law gives death its lawful power. Without the law sin is not perceived or imputed (Ro 3:20; 4:15; 5:13). The law makes sin the more grievous by making God's will the clearer (Ro 7:8-10). Christ's people are no longer ‘under the law’ (Ro 6:14).” (Jamieson, Fausett, and Brown)

“Christ has obtained a victory over the law; he has stopped its mouth, and answered all its demands; he has been made under, and subject to it; he has obeyed its precepts, and bore its penalty, and has delivered his from the curse and condemnation of it, so that they have nothing to fear from it; it is dead to them, and they to that.” (John Gill on 1 Corinthians 15)

“Sin is the parent of death, and gives it all its hurtful power.” (Matthew Henry's Commentary)

“Christ, by dying, has taken out this sting. He has made atonement for sin; he has obtained remission of it. **It may hiss, but it cannot hurt.**” (Matthew Henry's Commentary)

It is to our detriment that we fail to see the “now” of a living Christ. If the life we live is constantly pulling us away from heaven and not pushing us closer to heaven, then we must begin to evaluate what it is in this life that is distracting us from the life to come.

This brings us to the final movement within the paragraph and infuses us with strength and comfort.

IV. An exultant eruption - the promise made (vv. 57-58)

⁵⁷ “but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:57, 58).

The importance of this chapter for daily living is unavoidable. There is a sense in which we tire of always trying to convince people of the indispensable nature

of biblical Christianity. There is a false Christianity that is powerless to do anything for the individual but enables them to live lives of deception. Biblical Christianity is powerful and it penetrates, shapes, and transforms everything, both now and forever.

Paul knows nothing of a dead orthodoxy or unstable emotionalism. Doctrine is what stabilizes emotion and emotion is what humanizes doctrine. The study of truth cannot be severed from the practical implication of such truth in daily life. I believe in God the Father, who stands as the ultimate source from which all things created flow. I believe in God the Son, who is enough in this life and in the life to come as all satisfying and sufficient. And I believe in the God the Holy Spirit, who opens my eyes to the greater reality of His heaven on earth and the total temporal nature of this life.

A correct theology of the resurrection forces a three-fold response.

A. Gratitude for Grace (v. 57)

“What the law could not do, because it is law, (and law cannot provide pardon,) is done by the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: he has died to slay death; he has risen again to bring mankind from under the empire of hades.” (Adam Clarke’s Commentary)

The resurrection is confirmation that God will keep and has kept His word. We are to thank God for His victory which He has given to us. The victory was in no way due to us. We brought nothing to the table of God’s victory. I find it regrettable that many believe they will have grounds to boast before the Bema Seat Judgment because of their obedience to the commands of Christ. Such thinking is irrational. Everything and all we have and achieve is because of grace and grace alone.

“It is altogether owing to the grace of God in Christ that sin is pardoned and death disarmed. The law puts arms into the hand of death, to destroy the sinner; but pardon of sin takes away this power from the law, and deprives death of its strength and sting.” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary)

“Those who remain under the power of death can have no heart to praise; but such conquests and triumphs will certainly tune the tongues of the saints to thankfulness and praise—praise for the victory (it is great and glorious in itself), and for the means whereby it is obtained (it is given of God through Christ Jesus), a victory obtained not by our power, but the power of God; not given because we are worthy, but because Christ is so, and has by dying obtained this conquest for us. Must not this circumstance endear the victory to us, and heighten our praise to God? Note, How many springs of joy to the saints and thanksgiving to God are opened by the death and resurrection, the sufferings and conquests, of our Redeemer! With what acclamations will saints rising from the dead applaud him! How will the heaven of heavens resound his praises for

ever! *Thanks be to God* will be the burden of their song; and angels will join the chorus, and declare their consent with a loud Amen, Hallelujah.” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary)

It is verse 57 that provides the fuel for verse 58. It is His victory given to us by grace that causes us to be steadfast, unmovable and always abounding in His work. There is great joy knowing that He is working in me and through me a work that is eternal.

Our second response to the resurrection of all things is steadfastness in serving.

B. Steadfastness in Serving (v. 58a)

Our lives are a part of an eternal line. Everything we do has an eternal significance. Nothing we do exists inside of a vacuum.

“For the believer, death holds no fear or sting. Death is no dead-end street. Rather, death is the open sesame, the gateway into life eternal, full and complete, through the effective atoning work of our risen Savior! Sweet, tender, loving and challenging is the closing words of this tremendous chapter.” (Millard J. Berquist, Studies in First Corinthians, 131)

Our final response to the resurrection of all things is meaning in moments.

C. Meaning in Moments (v. 58b)

There is a strong and adverse dichotomy between our heaven and our earth. We fail to see where the two are constantly intersecting. There is a fuller expression of God’s plan in the future and each day draws us closer to that final and fuller expression, but this moment, the one in which we live, is not foreign to that moment. Each and every day heaven and earth fusions are taking place. Because we do not see it is heartbreaking; but when we do see it, life is filled with hope, healing, and wholeness. Everything we do and everything we encounter has purpose. Just because we do not see it does not mean it is not happening.

APPLICATION: (What is the NEXT STEP?)

1. Are you saved? Have you accepted the gift of eternal life that is Christ Jesus?
2. If you are saved, live a life of gratitude.
3. If you are saved, do not give up but continue to keep going knowing that your life is not in vain.
4. If you are saved, then live each moment in light of its eternal significance.