

THE VICTORY OF THE MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

We have just read the passage from First Corinthians 15 that I will be speaking on this morning, and I want to particularly call your attention to the last verse again:

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. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

That is, your life is not meaningless or futile, your work is not useless or wasted no matter how routine or dull it may seem to you to be.

There are, perhaps, many here who feel that their labor is futile, routine, and unrewarding. I hear people complain all the time about how they do not enjoy their work, that they only work in order to eat. Now, this verse and this truth we are looking at this Easter morning is designed to help with that problem. You notice the verse all hangs on the word "therefore." (It has become trite to say that wherever you see a "therefore" in Scripture you have to stop and see what it is there for.) But that word introduces here the conclusion to the argument of the resurrection; this is where resurrection truth ought to come out at, and it ought to be an encouragement and a help to us in the rat race of life.

This is all the more remarkable when you see how this last section of Chapter 15 begins, at Verse 50:

I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. {1 Cor 15:50 RSV}

That may sound like theological language, but what it is saying, practically, is, "There is no way to achieve enduring value in God's eyes by utilizing your natural, normal, human resources." That is what "flesh and blood" means. That sounds strange, does it not? What Paul says, in effect, is: "Nothing that wins the approval or the applause of men has any value at all in the sight of God." This includes all the Hollywood Oscars, all the athletic trophies, all the academic degrees, all the Nobel Prizes, or achievements of a lifetime of labor. None of these can ever impress God in the least degree. That is frightening, is it not?

A young man called me up not long ago. He introduced himself on the phone as a young Christian and a businessman. He said he was sure that in the next few years he would probably be making about fifty million dollars, and his question to me was, "How can I use my money to lay up treasures in heaven and not treasures on earth?" I told him, "You do not need money for that. In fact, the biggest obstacle you will have to laying up treasures in heaven may be your money, depending upon how you use it." Then I quoted to him the words of Jesus in the 16th chapter of Luke, "... that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God," {Luke 16:15 KJV}. Now if you are going to take that verse seriously -- and remember it comes from the lips of Jesus himself -- you will see that it agrees exactly with what Paul is saying here. Flesh and blood cannot do anything of value in the kingdom of God. It cannot lay hold of it; it cannot achieve anything within it. This is what startled Nicodemus so when he came to Jesus, because he was a respected and highly successful leader in Israel, he thought. But Jesus said to him, "You have to start all over again. You must be born again," {cf, John 3:7 KJV}. This is what Paul is saying here.

Well, what is the answer then? How can you make your life worthwhile in God's sight? How can you achieve, by means of labor and effort and energy, anything that is enduring beyond this life? The answer, Paul says, is, "It's a mystery."

Lo! I tell you a mystery. {1 Cor 15:51a RSV}

That is his response. We have already come to understand that the word "mystery," when it is used like this in

Scripture, does not refer to something murky or mysterious or hard to understand. What it means, of course, is a truth that our human sense can never discover, that no scientific investigation will ever reveal, that no amount of intense research on the part of human beings will ever unravel.

And here is the 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 nature must put on the imperishable, and the mortal nature must put on immortality. {1 Cor 15:51b-53 RSV}

As we have been seeing all through this chapter, that is a gathering up of the great argument of the apostle that this change that we anticipate happening to us as believers is a direct result of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. My wife greeted me this morning with these words: "You had better get up. It is time for you to go and speak to more than 3,000 people and tell them about the most exciting thing that has ever happened on this planet." That is true. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the most remarkable, the most revolutionary act that ever took place on this earth. The result of it, as Paul says, is that there is a change coming to us.

Now, the mystery is not that "we shall not all sleep," although that is true. There is a generation of Christians that is never going to die. Scripture constantly anticipates this. There are some who will not even have to pass through the portals of death, such as we know it, but will instantly, while they are walking around, suddenly, without warning, be changed -- "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." That phrase refers to the little change of light that occurs when you blink. It is one of the fastest speeds known to our human experience, and that is how fast the change will take place to some.

There are others who will die. All the generations of Christians before us have died, but that is not the important thing. Whether you live or die, Paul says, the mystery is "we shall all be changed." And it will be a remarkable change. As we have already seen in our last study, this change means that our bodies will take on the opposite characteristics to what they now have. This is an "earth suit" I am wearing here this morning. It is fitted for time, and it is subject to decay, to weakness, to losing its ability to function, to groaning and complaining. But it will be changed, Paul says, "This perishable must put on the imperishable." This mortal, subject to death, must become no longer so; it must become imperishable, unable to die. That is the change.

When is this going to be? Paul's answer is, "at the last trump." The next question, of course, is "When is the last trump?" That is what everybody wants to know. The answer of Scripture is, "at the return of Jesus." Paul says it in First Thessalonians, Chapter 4:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. {1 Th 4:16 KJV}

That is the last trump you will ever hear, the trump of God, when the dead in Christ shall rise first:

Then we which are alive and remain so shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. {1 Th 4:17a KJV}

That is the great event, the great change that is coming. I believe, as I have already stated, that this occurs for every one of us when we step out of time into eternity, but it will also occur when Jesus steps back out of eternity into time. This is the event that the apostle refers to.

Now it is a certain change. It must occur. Notice how he puts it, "This perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality." Why? Why must it? The answer is in the next verses:

**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 thy victory?"**

O death, where is thy sting?" {1 Cor 15:54-55 RSV}

I prefer the King James rendering here, based on the Textus Receptus, which says the triumphant shout is:

O, death, where is thy sting?

O grave, [or, literally, *Hades*] where is thy victory? {1 Cor 15:55 KJV}

Standing beside the grave of a Christian whom I just buried, I have often felt like that. Though there was sorrow as loved ones bade good-bye to someone they loved, nevertheless I have often sensed an electric excitement, and seen a radiant hope pervading the whole group. Their hearts and mine were saying, "O, death, where is your sting? O, Hades, where is your victory?" I have been at funeral services where the whole congregation stood at the end and, led by a thundering organ, sang the "Hallelujah Chorus." I thought it an appropriate expression of what people were feeling at that moment.

What is Paul saying here? Well, he is saying this change must occur because it is the outworking of a change that has already occurred in the hearts of those who have faith in Jesus. There is something that has already happened, he says, and that guarantees the other change. And what is that? He tells us: "Death is swallowed up in victory." The fear of death is gone. Every one of us, without exception, in the "natural," fears death.

What made the passengers pale with fear when that plane, flying over Michigan last week, began to roll, and then suddenly, out of control, plunge five miles straight down? Some of them clutched one another and cried out in terror; some began to weep and cry. Why? Because there is a fear of death. And what makes us afraid of death?

Paul analyzes it. He says:

The sting of death is sin, {1 Cor 15:56a RSV}

We are afraid of death because it is an unknown, over which we have no control. We cannot evade it -- it is beyond us. We are in the grip of other forces, and, what bothers us is, we have a sense that we are being plunged into accountability. Beyond death lies a settling, and an answering, for where we have been, and how we have lived, and what we have done. That is why death is such a fearsome thing. It is made all the more so by the law that says you cannot escape the evil of your past. God cannot set it aside nor can any man. It must be faced. There can be no deliverance from it. That is what makes us afraid of death.

But the good news coming to us from the resurrection of Jesus, following his crucifixion, is that this power of sin is broken. We are no longer helpless; we are no longer unable to change. Many people today are troubled by an unending struggle they feel within to try to be different, but they cannot find the way.

I read this last week a letter from a girl who had written to Ann Landers because she was trying to stop smoking and nothing she did could break that habit. She started lying to her husband, and to others around, because she could not find a way to break it. But breaking the smoking habit is a lot easier than breaking some of the other habits that afflict us -- like a vicious temper, or a lustful mind, which turns everything into sexual fantasies, or a bitter spirit which views the actions of others in a suspicious light.

How do you get free from those terrible feelings, especially the guilt that comes over us because of them?

How can you escape from the sense that you have hurt and injured many people and there is nothing you can do about it, and some day you will have to answer for it?

Well, the good news is that there is a way. Sin's power has been broken. We have been given a way to say, "No!" and to be able to do it despite the pressure. Even when we fail there is a way of relief so that we can have the failure cleansed and put away and it no longer needs to haunt us.

What is that way? Paul tells us in Verse 57. This is really the heart of the mystery:

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Cor 15:57 RSV}

I want you to notice that is put in the present tense. It is not past, "who gave us the victory." It is "thanks be to God who keeps on giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." I do not know anything that means more to me as a Christian than the fact that every day I can lay hold of the grace of Jesus Christ. He is not a distant Savior who lived twenty centuries ago. He is alive, and I meet him every day. When I find myself having failed, faltered, and sinned, I come again and receive from him the cleansing that he has won for me on Calvary. My sins are washed away anew. I am forgiven once again, and given a clean slate to start over again from that moment. That gives me new power to say, "No!" to all the evil, afflictions, and pressures of my life. I know that *that* evil is put away; it will never come back to haunt me; I will not have to face it at the judgment seat of God. I call turn instead to try to make up, in as many ways as I can, to others for the hurt I have done, and to help others find the way of release and deliverance out of heartbreak and sorrow and guilt and fear.

That is why this passage ends with Verse 58:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, {1 Cor 15:58a RSV}

When you go back to your work do not see it as simply a way by which you earn your living. It has been given to you as an opportunity for you to have a ministry in which you witness, you demonstrate a changed life, a heart at peace, the radiant joy of fellowship with a living Lord on your face, and love pouring out of your heart to those who, like you, have struggled and lost frequently in the rat race of life.

That is what God sends us out to do as Christians. He has given us a work, not that we might make notable achievements which men applaud, and in which we make a name for ourselves. What God looks for is:

- How are we behaving towards others?
- How do we show
 - A loving spirit,
 - A gracious, forgiving attitude,
 - A willingness to return good for evil,
 - An ability to speak a word of release to those who are prisoners of their own habits,
 - To set free those who are oppressed by wrong, hateful attitudes,
 - To bind up the brokenhearted, and
 - To open the eyes of the blind?

That is the work of the Lord.

That is why God gives us contact with others.

That is why God has given us our work.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast [faithful at this] immovable [do not let the world's philosophy change you], always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [as you do it unto him, faithful at your task, radiant in your witness] your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

Something has already happened to those who know Jesus.

There may be some here who have not yet learned to know him, and this may be the moment when, in the loneliness of your own life and heart, you can say, "Lord Jesus, risen Lord, come into my life. Change me. Give me release from my sins, and from the power and the grip of the law; set me free from my evil past and begin to heal my present with your radiant fellowship." When you do that there is guaranteed to you, as there is to all, that there is coming a day when we shall all be changed.

On that day, what God has been working out in secret among us, will become radiantly visible to all. Paul calls

it the day of "the manifestation of the sons of God," {cf, Rom 8:19}.

Prayer

Our Father, we ask that you will hear the voice of any who cry out to you at this moment from sin-governed lives, struggling against habits they cannot break, longing for release from a guilty, dark, and stained past, wanting to find their way into life and peace and truth and joy. We pray that you will grant to them now the gift of a risen Lord. And as they believe that he has died for them, and rose again for their justification, that he will enter their life and heart, and they will be changed with that inner change which will surely manifest itself one of these days in that great and marvelous outward change of which the apostle speaks. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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