

IMPERISHABLE, IMMORTAL, VICTORIOUS

by Steve Zeisler

"The Surgeon-General has determined that cigarette smoking is hazardous to your health," declares the warning on every packet of cigarettes sold in this country. I have at times wanted to suggest to the Surgeon-General that 1 Corinthians 15:50, "...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," be imprinted as a warning on make-up, deodorants, baldness cures, and perhaps even in the offices of plastic surgeons who do face-lifts! All of our efforts to halt or even retard the aging process-the sagging flesh, the balding pate, the wrinkled face-are doomed to failure. The sure word of Scripture is that we are destined either to be raised imperishable in the resurrection, or that we will suffer eternal death.

THE FINAL DRAMA

This is the word which the apostle brings before us this morning in the resurrection chapter, the magnificent closing verses of 1 Corinthians 15:

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the imperishable 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 must put on the imperishable, and the mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying which 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. 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.

Have you ever seen performed on stage a play which you had previously read? The words, ideas and concepts really come to life when they are acted out in a dramatic presentation. I had this experience in junior high school when our school put on the musical 'The Wizard of Oz.' As the actors recited their lines, sang the lyrics of the well known songs, and the beautiful stage settings became life-like in the hands of the director and the stage crew, I was caught up in the adventure of those seekers on the "yellow brick road."

First Corinthians 15:50-58 is filled with sight, sound, and action. The truths of the resurrection are portrayed vividly, with dramatic effect. Paul has been arguing a certain viewpoint, using Scripture from the Old Testament, analogy, logic and other devices, to demonstrate that because of our uniting with Christ, the doctrine of the resurrection of believers is of critical importance to our faith. If we lose this, he warns, we are in danger of losing everything.

Having presented his argument, Paul now goes on to accentuate his words in these dramatic verses, 50 through 58. "...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," he declares. He continues, "Behold, I tell you a mystery..." With these arresting words, the apostle goes on to state in very dramatic fashion what will happen at the resurrection. I picture him as an actor onstage, his voice alternately rising to a shout and falling to a whisper as he unfolds the last great drama in phrases like "the twinkling of an eye," "the last trumpet," "death is swallowed up," etc. Death is addressed as a personal adversary. Noise, brightness, surprise and triumph reach a crescendo at the instant that the universe is transformed.

This is a "mystery," according to Paul, a revelation given him from God himself. "O death," he says, "where is your victory, your sting?" Death, man's great enemy, will lose in the end. In these words, the apostle sings of the final death of death. What a dramatic ending to this resurrection chapter!

THE LAST GENERATION

"in the twinkling of an eye,...the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." Paul has already illustrated, using the analogy of seeds, that what is planted in the ground looks very different when it germinates and begins to grow. By analogy, he points out that in the same way, resurrection bodies are very different than the original bodies which were buried in the ground at death. But here he adds another category, saying that one generation of believers will be changed from life to eternal life. Not every one will die, in other words. The final generation of believers living on earth at the time of Christ's return will be caught up with our Lord into heaven. This last generation will be raised with those who have died throughout the generations, changed utterly "in a moment." Every believer, dating from the time of Adam and his children, will then be raised, to be joined by believers who are living on earth. Thus it is true to say that "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

This is the "mystery" which Paul speaks of so dramatically in verse 51. This word is used in Scripture to describe an event or circumstance which cannot be known other than by God's unveiling of it. It is not discoverable by normal research. Having already argued by the methods which we have already referred to, the apostle now confronts with a "mystery" those who would disagree with the dramatic announcement of what is to come. These are not merely ideas which are open to argument, but truth from God himself. Not everyone will die "at the last trumpet," but all will be changed, given resurrection bodies and accompany the Lord, to live in heaven forever.

IMMORTAL

The implications of this are given in verse 53: "...this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality." Because we are destined to die, as human beings we face two dilemmas: 1) our lives will end (we are mortal), and 2) our bodies deteriorate (we are perishable).

Let us consider first the effects of knowing our mortality apart from the hope of the resurrection. Very soon after we are born we are confronted with the reality that we are going to die. Thus we are, in a sense, dominated by death even while we are yet alive. As he surveyed life, the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes put it this way:

Everything is wearisome. Man is not able to tell if the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor is the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is that which would be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, "See, this is new." Already it has existed for ages which were before us. There is no remembrance of earlier things and also of the later things which will occur. There will be for them no remembrance among those who come later still. (Eccl.1:8-11)

We are destined to die and to be forgotten, says this observer of life. He continues,

The fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. Indeed they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast. For all is vanity. All go to the same place. All come from the dust, and all return to the dust. (Eccl.3:19-21)

It seems that throughout the generations, despair is the grey background to everything man does in life. There is no remembrance of what we have done. There is no point to what we do. In the same way that ripples caused by casting a stone in a lake soon dissipate and fade, things return to where they were before we ever

arrived on the scene. We all must die and depart this world forever.

Without the insight of faith which we possess, the inescapable fact of our mortality colors everything we do. It robs us of strength and hope. Some develop phobias about death and deny themselves certain experiences-flying, for instance-because of their fears. They live in prisons which they have built themselves because they know that death will finally catch up with them.

Further, knowing that we are mortal leads to wickedness of all kinds. We hear much these days about fetal research. Cells are being taken from aborted fetuses to be used in medical research. The research is discovering that fetal cell transplants can medically benefit the already born who suffer from various life-limiting diseases. Surely the day is coming when some will advocate that human lives be sacrificed in utero-babies harvested-deliberately to prolong the lives of those whose resistance to their own mortality has no limits. If we have surrogate mothers offering their services today, certainly there are some who will be willing to have abortions for money. Our fear of death will drive us to deny life to others in order to hold on to our own. The only answer to the fact of our mortality is not grasping this life, but union with Christ in his resurrection. "This mortal will have put on immortality."

IMPERISHABLE

"Perishability" is the second concept which the apostle raises of in this section. "Mortal" speaks of the fact that we are certain to die, but "perishable" indicates that humans deteriorate. Our bodies begin to sag and smell; our hair greys and falls out; we degenerate. We fear this, too. But the writer of Hebrews says that "Christ will deliver those who through fear of death are subject to slavery all their lives." Fear of death makes us liable to slavery. We will act foolishly, committing ourselves to self-destructive habits, enslaving ourselves, because we see that our bodies are deteriorating. We anaesthetize ourselves with drugs and alcohol. We try to act younger than we are and make fools of ourselves, sometimes even destroying our families in the process of trying to reverse the irreversible process of aging. Because we are perishable, we try all kinds of potions and products, we even become involved in sexual misconduct to try and escape the inevitable. But we cannot prevent our bodies from deteriorating as we grow older. Christians, however, have the certain hope that one day they will be given new bodies that will respond to their spirits and express the glory of God. Believers therefore are not to be partakers in fending off the process of immortality and perishability, trying to thwart an inevitable process. Our hope is in the Lord.

DEATH'S STING

The apostle continues, "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." How was it that we once were under the domination of death? Death possessed a "sting" which dominated us and made us act foolishly, enslaving us to wickedness and phobia. Here, Paul identifies that sting as sin (verse 56). In our heart of hearts we know that we are sinful. Every person who has ever lived is aware of this fact. Apart from God's intervention, our lives consist of various efforts to conquer, transcend, or explain away our fatal disease-sin. The wages of sin is death, and it is ultimately to be faced if it announces that we have lost the battle. Death is either the door to life eternal or a terrible judgment. If we die in our sins we are sinners forever. Death stands as a threat to seal us in our sins. We will do anything to avoid this sting. We will dance to any tune, we will buy any philosophy to help us escape it.

SIN'S STRENGTH

Paul goes on to say that "the power of sin is the law." In Romans, he declares that there is a law, the certain, righteous character of God as it is revealed in Scripture and in creation, against which we have to measure ourselves. And this law will not bend. We are helpless in the face of it. We are like men in wheelchairs who are told we must run the 100-yard dash in 10 seconds. We may make a certain amount of progress, but the

10-second mark is something forever beyond our ability to accomplish. But the law offers no praise for good or even improving effort. It always demands absolute obedience and always condemns anything that falls short of that. This is why sin is so powerful, and why we fear death so much.

But all of the power of sin and death is rendered powerless in the death of Christ. This is why Paul can cry, "O death, where is your victory?" We have been released from the twin powers of sin and death and set free to live in Christ. The bonds of death had no hold over him, and we find our destiny in him. We will be raised immortal; we are not doomed to eternal death; and we will be raised imperishable; we are not doomed to waste away. Therefore, glory of glories, we no longer need to fear what is coming; the power of evil has been broken. We do not need to run for our lives anymore; we have been given life. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

ROOTS, GROWTH, AND PURPOSE

Jesus has triumphed over the enemy; our destiny is life, not death; and, not fearing death, we need no longer be slaves to that fear. If all of this is true, how should we live? The apostle tells us in the closing verse, giving us three exhortations in the process: "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."

First, "be steadfast, immovable." Paul is talking about being firmly rooted. In the book of James, we read of those who are forever being blown about by every doctrine that comes down. They are always open to every new idea on how to live; whatever guru comes along finds in them a ready audience. They are always moving from one thing to another and never finding what is truly satisfying. But Christians have at last a place where they can stand, a steadfast, immovable place. They know who they are, what they are about, why they are here, and where they are going. Thus they can stand firm.

Secondly, says Paul, we should be "always abounding in the work of the Lord." We should not only be rooted, but be growing, too. There is no plateau which we can reach and then stop. We need not fear that aging will bring about an end to our usefulness. Even the physically restricted can "abound" in the work of prayer and as counselors to the young.

And thirdly, knowing that opportunities for ministry abound, we should be aware that "our toil is not in vain in the Lord." Our service is eternally valued by the Lord and creates in us character we will take into eternity.

ASSURED OR ASHAMED

Last week, the mailman delivered two magazines to our home. One was the Christian Service Brigade Leaders Magazine, which featured the Brigade Post from Peninsula Bible Church, and it included a photograph of my eight year-old son and me. To my son's delight, this was not a make-believe, but a real magazine which the mailman himself delivered. The other magazine was Sports Illustrated, with a photograph of the Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson on the cover. As these two magazines lay on my desk, I thought about the ministry of Boys Brigade and Pioneer Girls in this church, of the long years of service by Roy and Maxine Bradford in this work. I thought about the boys and girls who have come to know Jesus through this ministry, about the boys and girls who have been disciplined and taught. This is not a high-profile group, but those who serve there know and love a Savior who has disarmed sin and death. Therefore it is not vain but purposeful to be in his service-"steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord."

Then I looked at Ben Johnson's photograph on the cover of Sports Illustrated. He looks so impressive, his powerful muscles and veins almost bursting through his skin. He is the fastest man in the world, but he is a cheat. He accomplished his records by taking steroids, which may yet kill him. He sold his body for an Olympic gold medal and for the wealth and fame that accrue to that. He sought glory in this life, but lost everything, even his good name, in the process.

This is a profound parable of what the apostle is saying here in this section. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the

kingdom of God." It will not work. Our bodies will deteriorate and die. They cannot win for us anything that we can hold on to. There are no exceptions, no beating the system. We can live lives of Christian service in anticipation of resurrection or we can live lives of lies and failure.

"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," says Paul. But in a moment, "in the twinkling of an eye," everything will change and Christ will return. He will raise the dead and we will be clothed in immortality and imperishability. Therefore, because this drama will be staged before the watching universe one day, we are faced with an opportunity today. We can be "steadfast, immovable," not blown about the place, "abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your work is not in vain in the Lord," aware that what we are doing in his service is valuable.

The English writer Malcolm Muggeridge was standing by his father's grave once, beside which was his own future grave. As he mused about death, here are the words he wrote on this occasion; may they serve to encourage us:

Death is a beginning, not an end. The darkness falls, and the sky is a distant glow, the lights of St. Augustine's City of God. Looking towards them, I say over to myself John Donne's splendid words, 'Death, thou shalt die.' In the graveyard the dust settles. In the City of God, eternity begins.

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