

THE VICTORY OVER DEATH

SERIES: PRACTICAL ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

By Doug Goins

I grew up in the church, and I remember Easter Sunday mornings with great fondness. But our church had a bit of an inferiority complex in the little town I grew up in, because we didn't have a bell tower. The Methodists had a bell tower, and they rang the bells every Sunday morning. I love the ringing of bells on Easter Sunday, or any Sunday morning, calling us to worship.

When Candy and I were in Germany on my sabbatical last fall, we worshipped with a family of Lutheran believers at a beautiful little medieval church. They had bells and a bell tower, and it was just glorious to hear the bells ringing. All around the world, millions of believers in every conceivable kind of building, with and without bell towers, gather together on Easter Sunday to celebrate this incredible victory. The supernatural, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about the victory over sin in our lives, over the guilt and shame that we carry around because we know we're sinners, and over the greatest enemy that we're all going to have to face: death.

God had promised Jesus' victory over death through the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah 25:7-8 promises us the ultimate result of the resurrection: The shroud that covers every one of us, the fear of death, will be taken away. That was written seven hundred years before the Lord Jesus even came to earth. From the beginning, God had defined a plan that would transform life, that would give us hope for the future.

In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 25:8: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." He also quotes the prophet Hosea (13:14), who seems to taunt death: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Those quotations summarize the heart of chapter 15. They capture the Easter hope that we know as believers in Jesus Christ. In verses 20-22 Paul challenged the skeptics in Corinth who said, "How can there be resurrection?" as well as the skepticism in every age that has followed: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive."

In this message we're going to conclude this glorious chapter in verses 50-58. Paul proclaims the marvelous victory that resurrection brings for those of us who belong to Jesus Christ, who have accepted the gift of spiritual life from him.

In a sense, these closing verses are a climactic song of victory, a kind of symphony. (A number of composers down through the ages have set this text to music. Brahms' *Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah* quote from it.) It's a symphony in four movements. The first movement celebrates this incredible triumph that we anticipate of being transformed from having a perishable body to having an imperishable body so that we can live forever with the Lord. The second movement celebrates the triumph that we have over sin, death, guilt, and shame. The third movement is a hymn of praise celebrating the power of the resurrection at work in our lives right now. And the final movement celebrates the fact that we're motivated to live life to the fullest. It really makes a difference in how we live to look back at the resurrection of Christ and to anticipate our own resurrection to eternal life in the future.

THIS PERISHABLE MUST PUT ON THE IMPERISHABLE

Let's look at verse 50, which talks about this victorious transformation. Paul explains why it is needed:

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Flesh and blood is just the sum total of our physical humanity. Even if we have been born anew spiritually to life in Jesus Christ, we're still earth-bound our entire life. As we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4538), our bodies are perishable, dishonorable, weak, natural. The reality is that each of us is in the process of dying. I'm now in my fifties, and I'm a lot different from the way I was in my twenties. I remember how I felt, what I looked like. As we grow older we feel the effects of aging, and we are very aware of our perishability.

In order for our bodies to last all through eternity in what Paul calls here "the kingdom of God," there must be a transformation so that our bodies are made ageless. They must be changed into a glorified state so that we can live in God's presence before his perfection, holiness, and beauty.

The good news is that because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there will come a point in time when we will be changed from having perishable bodies to having imperishable bodies. Paul explains the mystery of that transformation in verses 51-53:

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 this mortal must put on immortality.

Paul states the mystery twice: We shall all be changed. The word "all" suggests all of us who believe that "...Christ died for our sins...and was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...." (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This change that we anticipate is a direct result of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead two thousand years ago.

Paul calls this revelation a mystery. The word "mystery" can be a bit confusing to us because our current usage suggests something complicated, a riddle, something difficult to understand or untangle. But Paul's usage doesn't suggest complexity. The meaning is closer to that of our word "secret." Once somebody tells you a secret, it's not complicated anymore. All you needed was the information. So Paul is saying here, "I want to tell you something that's been a secret up to now, something you won't find mentioned anywhere else in God's word before this moment of revelation."

The secret is that the generation of people living on the earth when Jesus Christ comes back to claim his own will be instantly changed and taken to be with him forever. The same will be true for all the believers down through human history who have died physically. They will be resurrected, transformed, and they too will be with the Lord forever.

Paul is very certain about this coming day of transformation. In one sense that certainty is based on the beautiful promise that the Lord Jesus made to his disciples and to all of us who love him the night before he was arrested and executed: "I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). This victorious transformation when Jesus comes back is absolutely guaranteed. That's the point of the emphatic statements in verse 53: "For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."

THE POWER OF DEATH IS BROKEN

Why it's guaranteed is explained in the next verses. The triumph of resurrection life over death and sin and guilt is the second movement of our symphony. Verses 54-55 talk about the great good news that the power of death over us is broken.

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. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Paul knew his Old Testament very well. The point he's making in these two verses is that we have the certainty that there will come a time when death will have claimed its final life. When Jesus steps back into time from eternity, the grim reaper will have to hang up his scythe. Finally, at long last, death itself will bite the dust. That's the promise of these verses. Up to now it seems as if death has been king. It visits every family. It violates the life of every human being on this earth. It cuts everyone down to size, famous and unknown, humane and inhumane, great and small. The Greek poet Euripides wrote, "Death is the debt we all must pay." And Paul said that death is the last great enemy (1 Corinthians 15:20). But the marvelous Easter news is that when the final change occurs at Jesus' coming, death will never again have charge over us, and we'll have nothing more to fear.

The writer of Hebrews talks about that freedom from fear of death: "Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself [the Lord Jesus] likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives." (Hebrews 2:14-15.) That's the shroud over all of humanity that Isaiah described, but that power has been broken. There's nothing more to be afraid of because of what Jesus accomplished.

Look at what Paul says in verse 56:

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law...

If we're honest, we know that we are sinful people. Apart from salvation in Christ and God's saving grace at work in us, we're going to live life one of two ways: We're either going to deny our sinfulness and try to rationalize it, or we're going to try to learn how to manage sin and its consequences. Both of those are exhausting ways to live. Paul wrote in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. He was speaking of physical death and of spiritual death. Only where there is sin can death deal a fatal blow. Where sin has been removed--and that's what Jesus came to do--death can only interrupt this earthly life and usher in the heavenly life. We can count on that if we're willing to trust Jesus Christ with our sin. The apostle John wrote that our sins are forgiven for his name's sake (1 John 2:12).

In Romans 5:17 the apostle Paul talks a bit more about how the power of sin is broken for us: "For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one...." "The one" is Adam, and we are all sons and daughters of Adam, so we all live under sin. "...Much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness [salvation offered in Jesus Christ] will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." We can either reign in life, free from sin, or live in fear of death, frightened of what's on the other side of the door. Death in a sense represents either the door of resurrection in Christ, being raised imperishable, inheriting eternal life, living forever forgiven and free of sin; or the door to terrible judgment, dying in our sins, suffering eternal death, being sinners forever.

The last clause in verse 56, "the power of sin is the law," speaks of the guilt that results from living under law. The Bible tells us that God has revealed the law through his word. It's absolute, purposeful, consistent, demanding. Whether it's the Old-Testament law containing the Ten Commandments or the law that the Bible says is written on every one of our hearts, our conscience (Romans 2:14-15), it evaluates our sinful failure to live up to its standards. It fills us with guilt and causes us to approach God in fear and shame. Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all." We don't really believe God is a God of love because we live in shame. So the role of the law is one of condemnation. It was given to drive us to the end of ourselves, to bring us to the point of recognizing how much we need a Savior who can bear our sin and guilt and shame.

GOD KEEPS ON GIVING US VICTORY

Jesus, through his death and glorious resurrection by his heavenly Father, has conquered all those things. We can live free of all that bondage, and that's what verse 57 celebrates in the third movement of the symphony. It's a crescendo of thanksgiving and praise and worship.

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

Because of the victory of the resurrection, we are free to live grateful, worshipful lives all the time. We are no longer in bondage but are living out freedom in Christ. The verb "gives" is in the present tense. Literally, God keeps on giving us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. What that means is that every morning when we wake up, it's Easter morning. It means that we can continually lay hold of the resources of Christ. We can go to him for forgiveness when we fail. We can trust him to meet our needs. He is available to us as our risen Lord. He is not a long-gone historical figure who died and then was purported to have been raised from the dead. We celebrate a risen, living, victorious Lord!

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

Because that's true, we have a victorious motivation for living life to the fullest. We don't just exist, we abound, to use Paul's words. Look at the finale of this symphony in verse 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.

There are three things that Easter defines for us in this wonderful closing verse. First, it defines our stability in life: "...Be steadfast, immovable..." We'll be firmly rooted in what we know to be true about life and death because we have confidence in the resurrection. It gives solid footing. We won't be swayed by every idea that comes along about this life and the afterlife. The truth of 1 Corinthians 15 is non-negotiable, so we can stand firm. We know who we are, why we're here on earth, and where we're headed in the future.

Second, Easter defines our activity in life: "...Always abounding in the work of the Lord..." We're growing, changing, getting stronger, blossoming as we walk through life, totally dedicated to the work of the gospel, using our spiritual gifts in ministry. We become Easter activists for the sake of the kingdom, for the good of people around us. We're not passive, we're abounding because of confidence in the resurrection and the future hope that we have.

Third, Easter defines our hopeful assurance in life: "...Knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Because of the certainty of the resurrection, we're confident that our lives will count. The hope of the resurrection keeps us from despair and feeling useless. We know that the things we invest our time, energy, and resources in, if they're done for the Lord's glory, will accomplish something. Nothing will be wasted. That is tremendously motivating.

Almost a hundred of our folks just got back from a week Mexico last night, and it was wonderful to hear reports from my own children, other high-school students, and some of the leaders. They came back with a tremendous sense of elation. They knew that they were in Mexico by God's sovereign appointment. They saw him at work among them as a spiritual family. He energized them physically so that they could build four houses. Beyond the physical work, he gave them the privilege of ministering to families and to individual children in the barrio where they were. He gave them the opportunity to serve in an orphanage on their last day in Mexico. And they came back with a sense that God would continue what they had started. The toil was not in vain. There was a sense of abounding while they were there, and they came back tremendously energized and enthusiastic about the God they serve, who raises the dead, who is alive and powerful today, who is expressing himself through them.

I started out talking about how I love carillons and bell towers. As I said, all around the world in cathedrals and churches, the bells ring out the good news of this victory that Jesus has won, which we're confident is a foretaste of victory to come. It ought to call those of us who have invited Jesus to be our Savior and Lord to experience a more passionate desire to know him and the power of his resurrection.

I read a great story about Easter bells that signal victory. It was in a history of the Napoleonic wars in Europe. In the year 1800, the French emperor Napoleon invaded Austria, and they came to a town called Feldkirk. It was not defended, and it looked as if there would be no resistance. On the Saturday night before Easter they were within about six miles of Feldkirk. The Christians in that town gathered in their churches and prayed all night for deliverance from Napoleon's army. All through that night Napoleon marched his army toward Feldkirk.

On Easter Sunday morning, when the sun came up the bells of all the churches in the town pealed out their song of victory, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because Napoleon had introduced a new calendar with a ten-day cycle instead of seven, he had no Christian calendar reference. Napoleon and his troops didn't know it was Easter Sunday morning. They thought the bells were signaling jubilation because the Austrian army had come into the city and the people were rejoicing that they would be defended. On that assumption, Napoleon chose to retreat. Those Easter bells and the message they rang out meant that there would be peace in that countryside. There never was a French-Austrian battle for the town of Feldkirk.

For us the Easter message resonates with the victorious, triumphant life we can have because of the resurrection of Christ and the absolutely certainty that he will come back and right every wrong and once and for all declare triumph over all the enemies that we face. "Death is swallowed up in victory...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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