

The Final Victory

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵“O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” ⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

I suppose that to the casual observer, the Christian life ends as does every other way of life, in death. The language of such a person would be, "If the end is just the same for all of us, why should I bother about being a Christian?"

It is true that unless there is real assurance of victory at the end of the road; it is pointless to endure everything that is involved in the journey. As Paul has already said in verse 19, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." To many people the idea of our earthly bodies, which waste into dust, or are scattered over the face of the earth, or drowned in the oceans, or exploded into the elements by bombs, being *raised* and *united* again to an undying soul seems quite impossible, even fantastic.

But Paul has proved the resurrection of the dead in this chapter beyond all shadow of doubt. He has demonstrated the fact of the resurrection of Christ; he has produced evidence to support it. He has shown its implications for a Christian, and he has declared that Christ is only the first fruits, and afterwards they that are Christ's at His coming will be raised. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus from

the tomb is just the beginning of the great harvest. Within that word "afterwards," are all the hopes, the sighs, the longings, the tears, the disappointments, the tests, the faith and confidence of God's people ever since.

As we have seen in our last two studies, God has equipped us by the indwelling life of His risen Son to bear Christ's image in place of that of the first Adam. Now we will consider the final victory that is to be ours, and may God grant it may be very soon.

I want to point out to you from this portion, in the first place, the victory that confronts us. I have a word to say to the *believer*, a word to the *unbeliever* and *skeptic*, and also to the one whose heart is heavy with a sense of loss, who longs for that day when he will see his loved ones and the Savior face to face.

First a word to the Christian: look at this victory that confronts us all. Verse 51 says, "Behold I show you a mystery." This arouses our attention; it alerts all our faculties to discover what he has to say. A mystery is not something that cannot be explained, but something that you will never prove by intellect, something that you will never reason your way into by sheer process of argument. You do not find God that way; you can argue yourself *out* of a blessing and eternity, but never *into* it.

Here is the mystery which has been revealed to Paul: "We shall not all sleep." What a lovely word that is to describe the condition of those who have departed from this life trusting in the Savior.

Now, don't let that word "sleep" scare you. Although there are those folks who hold the view that between death and the coming of Christ the soul sleeps, that is, it is without consciousness whatever, we should not be afraid of this word "sleep." Now it is true that "sleep" is used as a synonym for death in the New Testament. Jesus

said to His disciples in John 11:11, "Our friend' Lazarus is fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." And similarly, He said concerning the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, in Matthew 9:24, "The child is not dead, but is sleeping." In Acts 7:60, Luke says that when Stephen was martyred "he fell asleep." The Apostle Paul says in verse 51 of our text, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." He says in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." **It is interesting to note that all occurrences of this word "sleep" are in relation to those in some way identified with the work of the Lord Jesus.**

All occurrences in the New Testament of this concept of "sleep" in relation to death have in mind *not* the sleep of the *soul* but the sleep of the *body*. You see, at death, our bodies become destitute of sense, and incapable of labor. They "sleep" in the dust, free from pain and fatigue themselves, and incapable of being affected with weariness of suffering, or by any of the other problems of this present life.

But, this is not true of the spirit. It is the spirit of man that is born again, and when the body returns to dust the spirit returns to God who gave it.

In Revelation 14:13 we read that those who die in the Lord are "blessed" (happy) and that they "rest from their labors," but cessation from labor and cessation of consciousness are entirely different facts.

The consciousness of the dead is taught by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven, if so be that, being clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened; not that we would be unclothed, but clothed

upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the very same thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore, we are always confident, knowing that, while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord (For we walk by faith, not by sight); We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." The Greek word translated "absent" means "to be separated from" and the Greek word translated "present" means "to be at home." The literal translation of verse 8 would read this way, "I prefer to be separated from the body in order to be at home with the Lord." In Revelation 6:9-11, we are told this about the souls of men, "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren as they were, should be fulfilled." **There is no such thing as unconsciousness in the spirit world.**

Jesus Himself emphatically and clearly taught the consciousness of the dead, as seen in Luke 16:19-31, "There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, who was laid at his grate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table; moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom; the rich man also died, and was buried; and in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and

you there is a great gulf fixed, so that they who would pass from here to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from there. Then he said, I pray You, therefore, father, would send him to my father's house (For I have five brethren), that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, No, father Abraham; but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Now don't show your ignorance of the scriptures by telling someone that this story is not real, but that it is just a parable. This is not a parable. This story is the literal account of two men who lived on this earth, and their spirits are still living today.

But, how do we know that? In Matthew 13:3 we are told that Jesus "spoke many things unto them in parables," and in the verses that followed He gave them a parable of the sower and the seed as a means of helping them to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew 13: 24 we read, "Another parable put he forth, unto them," and this is followed by the parable of the tares and the wheat.

In Matthew 13: 31, "another parable put he forth unto them," and here the Lord explained the comparison between the kingdom of heaven and a mustard seed.

In Matthew 13: 33 we read, "Another parable spoke he unto them," likening the kingdom of heaven to leaven.

In Luke 12:16 we are told, "He spoke a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully."

Now compare the introduction of these parables with the introduction in our passage from Luke 16:19, "There was a certain rich

man...There was a certain beggar."

We might also note that there is not a parable in the Bible where a proper name is used; but in the passage from Luke 16 the beggar is identified by name as "Lazarus" and "Abraham" is also named. God the Holy Spirit is seeking to show us the importance of understanding that each of us has an eternal destiny.

Notice that "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." **There will be a generation which will not die, for in the middle of life, among the ordinary events of human experience, this change will come.** Suddenly, "in the twinkling of an eye."

In the case of those who have died, corruptible flesh shall put on incorruption, the body that is laid aside in the tomb will be raised a new body. So also, for those who are alive on that great day, mortal shall put on immortality. Corruption cannot inherit incorruption; mortality cannot inherit immortality.

I am reminded of the man who came to Jesus in Mark 10:17-22, and said, "Good Master, what must I do that I might inherit eternal life?" **Well, the truth of the matter is that you can't inherit life!** The Lord's answer to that rich young ruler was the very same thing that Paul is constantly emphasizing: put off the old, put on the new. Put on the new man in Christ and make no provision for the flesh.

But what does all of this have to do with the resurrection? Now listen very carefully, the fate of your soul will also be the fate of your body; the two are partners. They separate for a little while, as the body waits for its resurrection. **But what happens to your spirit, one day happens to your body also.** The body is put aside in the grave, but at the rapture of the church, the Bride of Christ, that body is raised again incorruptible.

Paul uses the same kind of language in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17,

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

Therefore, when we understand the truth of the resurrection, we have this assurance, as seen in verses 55-57, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Here is the Apostle Paul daring to laugh at death and the grave. You see, death would never have existed apart from sin, as seen in Romans 5:12, "As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." **The law of God had been broken, and the sentence of death was upon all men.**

What is the answer? His name is Jesus. The death of Christ on the cross has satisfied every demand that God can ever make on humanity. **Does the law of God require the death of the man who breaks it?** The answer is yes, and Christ has died for the sinner!

Then the sting is taken out of death because sin is cancelled, and the strength of the law to condemn us has been removed, because it has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Therefore death is no longer an enemy for the child of God, but an instrument of freedom from the reign of sin in his body. There will always be that human fear of entering into the unknown, unless Jesus comes first.

Therefore, Paul draws this conclusion in verse 58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

In other words, eternal life is eternal, and our victory in Jesus truly is victory.