

O Death, Where Is Your Victory?

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:55-58

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9

Every one of us in this room faces certain threats. Some are personal, like a vindictive boss; others are impersonal, like cancer. Some are common to all of us; others are unique to you personally. Some are well known to us; others are unknown and surprise us when they strike. That's the bad news.

The good news is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ defeated them all. Our text this morning demonstrates that, no matter what enemies threaten you, they have been defeated and rendered powerless by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Read 1 Cor 15:55-58. Pray.

Obviously, these verses do not deal with every danger in our lives—war, disease, poverty, ignorance, etc. But Paul, the author, does have in view the two biggest threats we could imagine, and so, arguing from the greater to the lesser, we can infer that if the resurrection defeats our two biggest threats, then we don't need to worry about the smaller ones either.

The two greatest threats to every person on this planet are death and hell. Death is the end of physical life, and hell is the end of spiritual life—an eternal, spiritual death. These two foes to human life and joy outweigh every other problem in the world. In fact, they are ultimately the real problem behind every other problem.

Every problem that we face in the physical realm—AIDS, famine, poverty, economic depression, war, terrorism, disease—threatens us ultimately with death. And every problem in the spiritual/moral realm—adultery, false worship, greed, disobedience, hypocrisy, corruption, hatred, dissention, jealousy, lying—threatens us with hell. Death and hell are the great enemies that stand behind every other “little” enemy human beings face, whether physical or spiritual. Hell is a worse enemy than even Satan himself, since someday he will be cast there forever (Rev 20:10), leaving us facing its yawning, fiery chasm all on our own.

So death and hell are our two greatest enemies: death, stealing away our physical life and joy; hell, stealing away eternal life and the experience of paradise in God's presence forever.

Of course today, on Easter, we are here to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not stir up our worst fears of death and hell. But these are related, because our text shows that through His resurrection, Jesus conquered both death and hell. That is what Paul means when he gloats: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” He means that death and hell no longer hold any threat over the heads of those who come to Christ in faith.

So let's take these one at a time and see how Christ's resurrection defeated both of them.

Point 1: The Resurrection vs. Death (v 55a)

I remember the first time I thought seriously about my own eventual and unavoidable death. I was in 7th grade, and it was near Christmas. It was the last day of school before break, and we received news that girl who attended our school the year before was in a sledding accident and was instantly killed. That was the first time, but it was hardly the last. When I was a senior in high school, a friend I had witnessed to several times was shot and killed early in the morning at a bar in downtown Milwaukee. When I was in graduate school, another friend of mine died from an allergic reaction to peanut oil he didn't realize was in the chocolate-chip cookie he was eating. As most of you know, two years ago one of my best friends and my brother-in-law, Ed Horn, died at the age of 30. These deaths in my life very effectively stole away any illusory sense I had that I was young and therefore, death must still be far away.

Along the way, I experienced death in other connections: an uncle, one grandfather and then the other, various acquaintances. And in our own church family, just yesterday death's grim harvest reaped our own Delmar Stutzman. No one escapes. Given 80 years or so, every single individual in this building will be cut down by the Reaper's scythe. Every one of us is terminal.

Given this ghastly reality, Paul's mocking question in 1 Corinthians 15:55 seems to mock *us*, not death. After all, death gets all of us. Even Paul himself was cut down by a Roman sword. So what does he mean by asking, "Death, where is your victory?" Everywhere we turn it looks like death is the victor and we are the losers.

Our Scripture reading this morning from Isaiah 25 points us in the right direction for our answer:

Isaiah 25:6-9 ⁶ *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.* ⁷ *And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.* ⁸ *He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.* ⁹ *It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."*

Notice especially verses 7-8. Mixing his metaphors a bit, Isaiah writes of death as a "covering cast over all peoples, a veil spread over all nations" (v 7), and he looks forward to a time that God will "swallow death up forever" (v 8). Forever. No more death. And when does Isaiah say this will happen? Well, he doesn't say exactly, but we can conclude that it's still sometime in the future, not only for him but even for us. Look at the surrounding verses: it will be a time when God sets a feast for His people (v 6), when He wipes away all tears (v 8), when He finally takes away the reproach of His people (v 8) and brings them His full salvation (v 9).

So Isaiah looks forward to a time when death will be swallowed up forever, no longer to darken the world of men like a veil. It's somewhere out there in the future. This sounds somewhat similar to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, just prior to where we began reading. Look at verse 54:

1 Cor 15:54 *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."*

Paul, too, is looking forward to a time *in the future*. Why do I stress this? Because I want you to understand that Paul's hope here is not simply

the immortality of the soul. Paul and Isaiah are not talking about defeating death simply by virtue of our being created with immortal souls that will live forever. Is that true? Yes, but it's not what Paul is getting at here. He's talking about something else entirely—a sort of future transformation where "*the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality.*"

What is "the perishable"? What is "the mortal?" He's talking about our bodies, which are mortal and perish. This is confirmed in verses 42-44:

1 Cor 15:42-44 ⁴² *So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.* ⁴³ *It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.* ⁴⁴ *It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*

Here we see those same words: "perishable/imperishable," and he throws in a couple more contrasts for good measure. Notice particularly verse 44, where he indicates that he's talking about our bodies: "sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body."

Let me clarify and review. Paul exclaims "O death, where is your victory?" because he can look forward to a day when our perishable, mortal, dishonorable, weak, natural body will be transformed into an imperishable, immortal, glorious, powerful, spiritual body.

Two more pieces of Paul's argument that we need to see, and then I'll try to pull the whole thing together. In verses 42-44, how does he say this transformation is going to happen? By a resurrection:

- 42 "*so it is with the resurrection of the dead*"
- 43 "*sown in dishonor; raised in glory*"
- 43 "*sown in weakness; raised in power*"
- 44 "*sown natural; raised spiritual*"

The transformation from natural body to spiritual body happens via resurrection, a death-defying reversal of natural law.

Again, I want to point out here that Paul's cry "O death, where is your victory?" is not rooted in the mere immortality of our soul, but rather the glorious resurrection of our body. The Christian hope isn't just the perseverance of our soul and spirit forever. No, we look forward to a

day when this aching, decaying old body will be renewed, transformed, and restored! For example, in the case of our brother Delmar, we can say “O death, where is your victory?” not just because we know he is still alive in soul and spirit, but because we look forward to a day when his death will be entirely, radically, miraculously reversed and his body will rise again—imperishable, immortal, glorious, and powerful!

One more logical link and we’ll be able to see Paul’s whole chain. What does our future resurrection and victory over death have to do with Jesus’ past resurrection, which we celebrate on Easter? Or, to put it another way, what guarantee do we have that we will someday rise again? Notice verses 20-22:

1 Cor 15:20-22 ²⁰ *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* ²¹ *For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*

Here is the final piece of Paul’s argument, the crucial link that connects Jesus’ past resurrection to our own future victory over death. Jesus’ resurrection is a foretaste, a guarantee, Paul calls it “the firstfruits” of what is coming for the rest of us. That’s what he means when he says, “in Christ shall all be made alive.” You could sum it up like this: Jesus’ resurrection guarantees our own.

So, here are the steps in Paul’s argument, as we’ve worked backwards through it:

- We look forward to a future day when our perishable, mortal, natural body will be transformed into an imperishable, immortal, spiritual body.
- This transformation will happen via our resurrection from the dead.
- Our resurrection is guaranteed because Jesus was resurrected.

Let me drill down on that last point just a bit... Think about how Jesus conquered death. Here’s what He could have done but didn’t. He could have proved He was stronger than death just by being immortal—never dying. But He didn’t do it like that. Instead, He took death into His mortal body... and then blew it away by coming back to life and walking out of the grave.

Jesus was not like a soldier who moved behind enemy lines without getting caught. Instead, he went right to the enemy general, gave Himself up, got locked away in a POW camp, and then blew holes in the walls of every cell in the whole compound. Now every single soldier who gets taken captive can just walk right out through the holes left by the Man who went there before him.

The writer of Hebrews says it like this:

Hebrews 2:14-15 ¹⁴ *Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,* ¹⁵ *and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

How is it that Paul can cry, “O death, where is your victory?” Here’s how: Jesus’ resurrection proves that death cannot hold us because it could not hold Him!

Jesus’ resurrection means that the slow creep of death that we see in our bodies—aching joints, allergies, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure—will someday be completely reversed. Someday these corrupt old bodies will be made new! In one of his book titles, Puritan John Owen called it “the death of death in the death of Christ.” And so with Paul we look forward to the resurrection and renewal of our bodies. And with Paul we point our finger in death’s black face and say: “O death, where is your victory?”

Point 2: The Resurrection vs. Hell (v 55b-56)

Now Paul goes on to deal with the threat of hell. Notice his next question: “O death, where is your sting?” I call this the threat of hell because of what follows in the next verse.

What is the “sting” of death? “The sting of death is sin.” Why does he call sin that? Paul calls sin the “sting of death” because only sin can make death a door to hell instead of heaven. Think about it... if it weren’t for Jesus, the worst part about dying would be that now we have to start paying for all the sins we committed when we were alive. Once death comes, Satan would sting us with our sin and carry us straight to hell forever. That’s what “the power of sin is the law” means

in verse 56. God's law says that the penalty for sin is eternal death (Rom 6:23).

But Jesus broke the power of sin by fulfilling the demand of the law—He died for sin. And then He removed the sting of death—sin—by securing our full justification so that no accusation of sin could ever be brought against His people again.

Col 2:13-15 ¹³ *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,* ¹⁴ *by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

All this He accomplished, not simply by His death on the cross but by His resurrection from the dead (cf. Rom 4:24-25; 1 Pt 1:3). The resurrection assures us that God the Father was entirely satisfied with His Son's offering for our sin (cf. Phil 2:8-9).

To sum up, here's what the resurrection means for us:

- 1) It ensures that death is not the end and that we will rise again.
- 2) It ensures that our sin will not be used to condemn us and send us to hell.

In short, the resurrection conquered both death and hell.

So let me ask you: what is going to happen when you die and Satan comes along to "sting" you with your sin? The Scriptures teach that we all need Jesus at this point—we need Him as our Defender, our Advocate, our Savior. Don't overlook verse 57: *"thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* The victory is only through Jesus Christ. You cannot win it yourself. You must turn from your sins and take Him by faith as your Savior.

Let's close with verse 58:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

My friends, remember this: the resurrection assures us that everything we do for Christ in this life has eternal value. There will be a judgment, we will give account to Him for how we've lived, and He will offer rewards for faithfulness and diligence. So hang in there! Look forward to the reward! "In the Lord, because of His resurrection, your labor is not in vain."

[Song: See What a Morning]

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