

JESUS GIVES US THE VICTORY

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Key Verse: 15:57

“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

For the last one month of campus Bible schools and conferences we have experienced the victory of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. We enjoyed the work of the Holy Spirit and were inspired with new hope and vision. Still, though, in a corner of our hearts, we may feel a sense of failure for one reason or another, and become dispirited. In the movie “Ben Hur” the Roman commander Quintus Arias is involved in a vicious battle with an enemy force. In the course of fighting, he is thrown from his ship and knocked unconscious. He awakes on a piece of debris, floating in the sea. He is bound by chains and looks up to see Judah Ben-Hur, who had been a galley slave on his ship, standing over him. He assumes that he suffered defeat, loses all hope and draws his knife to take his own life. But Judah stops him. Later, they are rescued by a Roman vessel. As Quintus Arias goes aboard, other Romans begin to congratulate him for a great victory, and he is surprised. Like him, we are victors, even though we may suffer from a sense of defeat. Today, let’s shake off the sense of defeat, and claim Jesus’ victory. Let’s learn how to enjoy this victory in our daily lives.

I. Glorious Hope (35-49)

In order to understand this passage, it is helpful to think about the Platonic dualism of the Greeks which influenced their times. They believed that man and the world were composed of two distinct parts: the invisible and the visible. They thought the invisible world was good, while the visible world was evil. They saw the origin of man’s soul in the invisible world, from where it fell into the visible world of matter. To them, the physical body was a hindrance and burden, even a tomb of the soul. Their idea of salvation was for the soul to be set free from its entanglement in the physical body. When the gospel was preached in the Greek world, it was hard for people to accept that the body would be resurrected as part of God’s redemptive plan. This is why some people wondered: **“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?”** (35) In fact, our bodies decay and rot and smell awful after we die. Some people lose body parts in accidents or wars. Others are cremated after death. When we think of the dead rising with our imagination and reason, we cannot but conceive of zombies like the

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Walking Dead. So their question implies that bodily resurrection is undesirable and unreasonable.

To them, Paul explained how the resurrection of the body is very reasonable and desirable based on the metaphor of a seed and plant. Verse 36 says, **“How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”** It is a law of nature that a seed must die to produce a new plant. Jesus said, **“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds”** (Jn 12:24). In the same way our body must die in order for us to receive a new resurrection body. When it dies, God gives a new body. When we sow, we do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed (37). Verse 38 says, **“But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.”** Spring seems to have come. Many people are planting all kinds of seeds expecting that soon beautiful flowers and tasty vegetables will appear. If we look at the seeds of a marigold, morning glory or nasturtium, we cannot imagine the beauty of the flowers they will produce. Likewise, our resurrection body will be beautiful and glorious beyond imagination. God will give this body to each of us, keeping our own identity and unique worth. As there is a time gap between the planting of a seed and the appearance of the flower or plant, so there is a time gap between the planting of our bodies in the ground and the appearance of our resurrection bodies. When we plant a flower seed, we do not doubt the outcome, because we trust the law of nature. In the same way, regarding our resurrection body, we just trust God. God is almighty, wise, creative and has the best sense of art. God is beyond our understanding. St. Augustine said, “Since it is God we are speaking of, we do not understand it. If you could understand it, it would not be God.” Though we do not understand it, God will surely do it. Let’s just trust God.

When God created heaven and earth, he did not make it in black and white. He filled it with all the colors of the rainbow arranged with profound wisdom. He did not create just one kind of each species, but many kinds which are each quite distinct. And there is no evidence of evolution from one species to another. Consider flowers. There are so many kinds of flowers, at least 250,000. Among them there are about 4,000 kinds of cactus and 300 different kinds of roses. They make God’s world beautiful. As it is in the plant world, so it is among living creatures. Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals another, birds another and fish another (39). There are vast numbers of birds, fish, and animals, over 1,000,000 that are known. There are about 28,000 kinds of butterflies. And each kind of plant and animal possesses its own unique color, size,

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coat, smell and character. God created all things according to their kinds and made the world such a beautiful and interesting place! Verses 40-41 tell us about earthly bodies and heavenly bodies. Each have their own kind of splendor. The sun provides heat and light and energy to all the living things. King David described the sun like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course (Ps 19:4b-5). The glory of the moon is different. These days many people are talking about the “blood moon.” There are many different stars with vastly different sizes and elements, capacities and power.

Based on creation metaphors, Paul explained what kind of body we will receive. Let’s read verses 42-44a. **“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”** Apostle Paul saw our body as perishable, dishonorable, weak, and natural. People boast about their bodies: muscle size, height, hair color, eye color, nose shape, and so on. Women compete in beauty contests and men in strength contests. But all of these bodies will decay and be eaten by maggots. We human beings really want to live a glorious life. But as the years pass by, we become full of the stains of sin and flawed in many ways. At the end of their days, not many people say, “I lived a really glorious life,” but many say, “Oh! What might have been.” Our physical bodies are so weak that invisible bacteria can render us completely helpless. Viruses and cancer destroy so many people every year. More than that, in our weakness, we are vulnerable to temptation. As time goes by we become weaker and weaker and finally we are swallowed up by the power of death. How miserable our body is. But don’t worry. The resurrection body is not like this. Paul said, **“...it is sown a perishable body, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”** Our resurrection bodies will be spiritual and glorious beyond imagination. We will be strong and imperishable. There will be no death or disease or aging. With these resurrection bodies, we will be suited for life in the kingdom of God.

How will this happen? It will be done by Jesus, who is the life-giving spirit (45-46). As we are born of Adam, from the dust of the ground, we have borne the likeness of this earthly man. So, as we have been born of Jesus, the life-giving spirit, we will bear the likeness of the heavenly man, Jesus (48-49). We will be powerful like Jesus; we will be glorious like Jesus; we will be holy like Jesus; we will be perfect like Jesus! When we believed in Jesus, he gave us new birth by the

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work of the Holy Spirit. The seed of God's life grows in us until we are transformed and receive a new body. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee that this will happen when Jesus comes again. This is our glorious hope. Every Sunday, when we recite the Apostle's Creed, we confess our faith in "the resurrection of the body." Now we know what this means. When we have this glorious hope in our hearts, we are not attached to the things of this world. We are free from greed to be good stewards; we can live a vibrant, dynamic and glorious life.

II. Glorious Victory (50-58)

Thus far, Apostle Paul has talked about the glory of the resurrection by explaining what kind of body we will receive. We look forward to this event with glorious hope. When Jesus comes again, we will experience the final victory. Verses 50-53 explain the necessity of transformation and when this will happen. Verse 50 tells us why our bodies must be transformed. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. God is holy, and his kingdom is holy and pure. Revelation 21:27a says, **"Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful..."** Only those with a resurrected body can inherit the kingdom of heaven. In verses 51-53 Paul tells us a mystery. We will not all sleep, that is die physically. But we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (51-52a). For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (52b). Receiving a resurrection body is not an option, but imperative. **"For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality"** (53).

"When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: Death has been swallowed up in victory" (54). When Jesus comes again, we will be transformed into our glorious bodies. At that time, the power of death will completely disappear. Since Adam's fall, the power of death has ruled mankind as a cruel tyrant. Every man has died by the sting of death without exception. The rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the beautiful and the homely, the intellectuals and the working class, somebodies and nobodies—they all face the same destiny. All must kneel down before the power of death. That is why the author of Ecclesiastes says, **"Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless"** (Ecc 1:2). Not only do people suffer from the fear of death, but also they suffer from the elements of death, such as fatalism, despair, sorrow, anxiety, impotence, a sense of failure. But when Jesus comes again, death

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is swallowed up in victory. Jesus will swallow up death like we drink a cup of coffee. And death will be gone. No more death! Only life in Jesus! So Apostle Paul sang a song of victory: **“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”** (55)

In verse 56 Paul explains how powerful sin and death are: **“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”** The power of death pierces mankind through sin, for the wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23a). We often take sin lightly, thinking it is enjoyable and we can control it. But once we commit sin, its power captures us and we become slaves of sin. Sin bears the fruit of death inevitably. Sin is like cancer—it makes us sicker and sicker until we die. If cancer is discovered in its beginning stages, it can be treated effectively. Likewise, if we detect sin in its early stages, and repent quickly, we can minimize its damage. We should take sin seriously, even in small things.

Yet even though we do our best, we have no strength to get out of it. It is because the power of sin is the law. The law was personified by Inspector Javert in “Les Miserables.” He hunted down Jean Valjean to accuse him of his crime. Though Jean Valjean had subsequently done many good things, they gave him no merit. Inspector Javert condemned him without mercy. Apostle Paul explained the role of the law in Romans 7. Before knowing the law, he thought he was okay, not recognizing his covetous desire as sin. But the commandment “Do not covet” convicted him that it was sin. Then he became like a condemned criminal under a death sentence. The law exposes our sin and condemns us. There is no way out. So Paul cried out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Ro 7:24) Then he said, **“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (57).

When Jesus died for our sins, our old sinful self also died. When Jesus was buried, our old self was buried with him. When Jesus was raised from the dead, we also were raised to a new life. We are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection through faith in him. Jesus’ death became our death. Jesus’ resurrection became our resurrection. Jesus’ victory became our victory. God has done all of this for us. All we need to do is to receive this victory with faith and give thanks to God. The verb tense in verse 57 is present: **“he gives us....”** We can enjoy this victory now and forever.

Thus far, Apostle Paul has testified about the glorious hope of the resurrection body and the glorious victory over sin and death. Now he exhorts us.

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Let's read verse 58 together: **“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”** There are many temptations to vain things in the world. Yet we deny ourselves in order to do God's work. If we bear much fruit, we feel that it is worth it. But when we cannot see any visible fruit, even though we work hard, we feel that our labor in the Lord is in vain. Then we may be tempted to give up our God-given mission. It is easy for us to be swayed by false ideas. But we must stand firm and let nothing move us. We should always give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. When we are faithful to God, he will reward us with eternal life in his glorious kingdom in a new resurrection body.

In today's passage we learned that Jesus gives us the victory. The problem is that we do not claim this victory and remain in a sense of defeat. We need a sense of victory instead of a sense of failure whatever we do. Let's have a sense of victory. Apostle Paul had a sense of victory. It was not because his condition was always good and everything was going well. It was because of the life of Jesus within him. So he confessed: **“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body...Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”** (2 Cor 4:8-10; 16-17). Apostle Paul had such a sense of victory in Jesus. Let's live with a sense of victory in Jesus every day.