

Victory

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. Almighty God, you are the author of this very book that we have open in front of us.

And as I come to preach from your word and this congregation comes to hear your word, I pray that you will speak to us from it. Open our hearts and minds to receive your truth.

And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

1 Corinthians 15, beginning then at verse 50. And Paul writes these words. I tell you this, brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

[1 : 07] 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 body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 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.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? 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 brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

The Lord will bless this reading of his words to us tonight. In vain.

[2 : 29] Are those not the most mocking, most hollow, most empty words in the English language? In vain. Put them at the end of the most heroic battle, at the end of the most skillful surgery, at the end of the most selfless sacrifice, and all our human endeavors crumble to dust.

They fought bravely, but their sacrifice was in vain. They tried to save her life, but it was in vain. They worked so hard, but it was in vain.

And if the 15th chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is not true, then you can write these words across all you've ever done at church, all you've ever done at home, in vain.

If Jesus Christ is just the same as all the founders of all the other world religions, if he is dead and his body is still in the tomb, then you can write these words after the Reformation, you can write these words after the Church of Scotland, you can write these words after St. George's Tron, in vain.

Life is simply meaningless. Nothing we do matters. In a few years we'll be gone and forgotten. In vain. But here is what changes all our whole human existence.

[3 : 52] Look at verse 57. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Therefore, because of, as a result of, victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, your labour, your life, your work, your very existence are not in vain.

We're going to look tonight at this great victory that God gives us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Three points to help us understand the passage. First, victory, why?

Second, victory, how? And third, victory, when? First then, victory, why?

The vivid metaphor in this passage is that death is a monster. Look at verse 55. Oh, death, where is your victory?

[5 : 05] Oh, death, where is your sting? And death is a powerful monster who appears to be victorious. Death is a poisonous monster whose bite is venomous.

You see, we live in a world where death is treated as natural. It's just a biological fact of life. And in the words of Simba, the Lion King, we're all part of the circle of life.

We're born, we grow up, we live, we reproduce, we die, we rot. We disappear into the earth, and on and on it goes, round and round in the circle of life.

We're just like raindrops falling into the ocean. Death is as natural as birth. But Christianity says, death is unnatural.

Death is a travesty. Death is an outrage. The Bible is a story that tells us the truth about who we are, why we're here, and where we're going.

[6 : 06] And when you listen to the story that the Bible is telling, you realize that death is unnatural. Death is an enemy. And when the curtain rises in Genesis 1, there's a world with no death.

It's a world with no mourning. A world with no crying. A world with no pain. God has made the world and everything in it. And he pronounced that it was good.

And man is living in the Garden of Eden, under God's rule, and enjoying God's perfect blessing. And all around is life, and joy, and vibrancy, and hope.

And in fact, the only mention of death is the single prohibition that God gave Adam and Eve. You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die.

But you know the story. They did eat of it. They didn't want to live under God's authority. They wanted to be their own gods. They wanted to decide for themselves what was right and what was wrong.

[7 : 15] And they disobeyed. They ate the fruit. They sinned. And just as God said, death entered our world.

How could it be anything else? God is all that's life, and light, and hope, and beauty. Reject him. And there's only death, and lies, and falsehood, and darkness.

And first, they die spiritually. They're cut off from God. Their relationship with him is broken and comes to an end. And secondly, they age.

Their bodies break down, and ultimately, they die physically. Paul writes in Romans 5 and 12, Therefore, justice and entered the world through one man, and death through sin.

And in this way, death came to all men, because all sinned. Sin and death spread throughout all creation. And that's why the world is the way it is today. But death isn't natural.

- [8 : 20] God made us to live. God made us to live under his gracious rule. God made us to live and enjoy his blessing. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas wrote of death, Do not go gentle into that good night.
- Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. And we've sinned. We've sought to be our own gods.
- And death reminds us that in the end, we're human and weak and powerless. And we live all our days fearing its approach. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews says that apart from Jesus Christ, all our lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.
- In one of Philip Larkin's poems, he describes how he wakes up every morning. In time, the curtain edges will grow light.
- Till then I see what's really always there. Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, making all thought impossible but how and where and when I shall myself die.
- [9 : 38] And it's not just an abstract idea. It's not just a biological reality. It's an enemy. It's a poisonous monster whose bite is venomous.
- Bad enough to be bitten by death, but there's poison in its bite. And what's its poison? Paul writes in verse 56, The sting of death is sin.
- What makes the bite of death so poisonous, so painful, so horrible? Paul says, it's sin. If only death were oblivion.
- If only it were Thomas' good night. If only it were the end. But it isn't. Death is a sting. There's poison in its bite.
- And that poison is sin. And the sting or the poisonous bite of death is that it brings us face to face with the sins of a lifetime.
- [10 : 42] The Bible says, man is destined to die once and after that face judgment. Simon Wiesenthal was an Austrian Jew who was imprisoned in a concentration camp during the Second World War.
- And he wrote a famous book called The Sunflower. And in it he describes being taken into a room where a 22-year-old SS soldier was dying.
- And the dying man said to him, I am left here with my guilt. In the long nights while I've been waiting for death, time and time again I've longed to talk about it to a Jew and to beg forgiveness.
- The sting of death is sin. And the poison of death is that it brings us face to face with the sins of a lifetime.
- But what makes that sting so painful? What makes the poison so powerful? What makes that venom so toxic? Paul goes on to say in verse 56, the power of sin is the law.
- [11 : 53] You see, sin isn't just a bad feeling or a vague unease about what we've done. We have broken God's laws and we face prosecution.
- You know, the long arm of the law is a cliché that's often used in Western films. But the long arm of the law of God stretches right into eternity. And when Paul says the power of sin is the law, he means that every sin we've ever committed has been placed on our record.
- And the law red relentlessly catalogues our sin and confronts us with our past. And the verdict is inevitable, guilty.
- And the punishment is sure. Separation from God and eternal destruction. Death, is an enemy, a monster.
- It's got a sting. There's poison in its bite. And what makes that poison so powerful is the law. Victory, why? Because the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law.

[13 : 07] And if Jesus Christ can do nothing about that, then everything is in vain. Secondly then, victory, how?

Look at verse 56 again. 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. Victory comes through our Lord Jesus Christ and victory is given to us.

Well, if death is an enemy and Paul is declaring a victory, then there must have been a fight. Look to verses 3 to 5 for the scene of this great cosmic battle.

Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures and that he appeared to Peter then to the twelve.

[14 : 12] And this is the supreme conflict of the history of the universe. And it took place around 30 AD outside the city of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea.

And yet, you know, if you'd been there that day, you would have thought you were witnessing anything but a cosmic battle. You would have thought you were simply witnessing a cruel Roman execution.

A young man already so weak from the Roman lash that he can barely carry his own cross. He offers no resistance as they nail him down.

In fact, if you've been close enough, you might even hear him murmur, Father, forgive them. But he wasn't fighting the Romans. And when he's hanging on the cross, he has to endure the mocking of the Jewish passers-by.

They tell him to come down from the cross. He who saved others, let him save himself. And he's silent. But he wasn't fighting the Jews.

[15 : 21] And if he could bear the sight for long enough, you would have witnessed a darkness come down over all the city of Jerusalem. And you would have heard him cry, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

What kind of battle is this? Paul wrote to the Colossians about Jesus. He forgave us all our sins.

Having cancelled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

He was waging a great cosmic battle against powers and authorities. The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. And he's dealing with the poison of sin made so toxic by the law.

Remember that criminal record? That long list of broken laws? That long arm of the law that stretches right into eternity following us? You see, when they crucified a man, the Romans fixed a notice above his head listing his crimes.

[16 : 42] For those two thieves it might have been a list of what they've stolen. It might just have been the word thief. And of course, above the head of the Lord Jesus was Pilate's handwritten notice.

This is Jesus, the king of the Jews. But remember, Jesus was innocent. Pilate, the very judge of his trial, had said so.

So then, why was he dying? Because the Jewish leaders were jealous of his popularity? Yes. Because Judas betrayed him?

Yes. Because Annas and Caiaphas handed him over to the Romans? Yes. Because the crowds had rejected him, crying away with him? Yes. Because Pilate ordered him to be crucified?

Yes. But there was so much more to it than that. Listen again to those verses from Colossians. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us.

[17 : 51] He took it away, nailing it to his cross. The written code, the criminal record, the evidence for the prosecution of every Christian.

He took it away, nailing it to the cross. He was crucified because of your criminal record.

It was as if the list of your sins were nailed to the cross above his head. In the words of Isaiah the prophet, he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. And on the cross he took the sting, the poisonous bite of death, made so toxic by the law, instead of us.

Donald MacLeod writes, On Calvary, Christ moved into unmitigated physical pain and total social isolation. He experienced all that hell could do by way of darkness and onslaught and temptation.

[18 : 57] above all, he experienced the agony of being forsaken by God his Father and becoming as the bearer of sin, the great outsider.

Yet, he did it and he did it for us and he drew the sting from death and if a poisonous snake strikes again and again, eventually its stores of venom are exhausted and its sting is drawn.

Well, death struck him with all the poison of sin made so toxic by the broken law until it had no poison left. And his last words as he died, it is finished.

The sting drawn, the poison drained, the venom neutralized and what about death? Well, that hasty funeral attended by just Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and watched only by a handful of women from a distance, it wasn't the end.

Resurrection was inevitable. As Peter said in the day of Pentecost, God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

[20 : 21] Impossible for death to keep its hold on him. The sting of death is sin. Every sin of every Christian atoned for.

The power of sin is the law. Every legal requirement met. Every legal demand satisfied. Death. Impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

He has won the battle. And on the first Easter morning, there was an empty tomb and a risen Lord. And so we sang this evening, Glory to Jesus, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory over death you won.

And his victory is our victory. Verse 57, But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Victory how? At Calvary 2,000 years ago, Jesus won the great victory over sin and death and the law. Thirdly then, victory when?

[21 : 31] You say, that all sounds very fine and uplifting, but what about me?

You say, I've got cancer. I'm dying, not winning. You say, I've just buried my wife. It seemed like defeat, not victory.

You say, I'm losing my parents to dementia. Nursing homes don't remind me much of victory. How can Paul say this in verse 57?

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through your Lord Jesus Christ. You call that victory? But look at verse 54.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality, death is swallowed up in victory.

- [22 : 37] Victory when? When the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality. When? We are changed. When?
- The last trumpet sounds. At the final resurrection of all things. We are still waiting for the end of death and ultimate victory.
- But where does that leave us here and now in 2011? Some people say that because we're Christians, death is no big deal. Henry Scott Holland's famous poem says, Death is nothing at all.
- I've only slipped away into the next room. But really, that's absurd. Tell that to the husband who's watched his wife die of cancer aged 45.
- Tell that to the parents of the child who's died in an accident. Tell that to the family of the grandparent who's wasted away from dementia. Death is nothing at all. That just does not explain our experience.
- [23 : 42] Our experience of suffering and watching the suffering and death of those we love. Christianity has to work in real life. If Christianity is any use, it has to explain what happens in the here and now.
- It has to show us why life is the way it is. Christ gives us the victory, but we still suffer and die.
- It's because our salvation is still far from complete. Christ is still we experience some of the benefits of Calvary here and now, but we're still waiting to experience all of the blessings of Christ's victory.
- That's why Paul says further up the chapter in verse 19, if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.
- It's because the best is yet to come in the life that's yet to be. Theologians explain this by saying that we live in the now and not yet.
- [24 : 50] You see, our resurrection is in two stages. Our resurrection is sure, but it's a two-stage process. Remember when Adam and Eve sinned and died in the Garden of Eden?
- They died first spiritually and then they died physically. Well, when we are united to Christ, we are resurrected first spiritually at the moment of our conversion and then later physically at the great resurrection on the last day.
- Listen to what Paul says to the Ephesian church. As for you, you were dead in your trespasses and sins. Spiritually dead. And then he goes on, but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ.
- We have been resurrected spiritually, made alive here and now. But then listen to what Paul says in his letter to the Romans chapter 8.
- We ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons.
- [26 : 06] The redemption of our bodies. And we are still waiting the redemption of our bodies. We are still waiting for our physical resurrection.
- It is not yet. And Paul puts those two facts together to give us the reality of everyday Christian life in 2 Corinthians 4. Therefore, we do not lose heart.
- Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. And there you have it. The reality of Christian life.
- We are resurrected here and now in our spirits, in our inner man. But our bodies are wasting away. We await the resurrection of our bodies.
- And that's why Christians get sick. That's why Christians get cancer. That's why we get dementia. That's why we have strokes.

[27 : 07] That's why ultimately we die. In God's mysterious providence of suffering, he has left that gap between the resurrection of our spirits and the resurrection of our bodies.

But one day, one day our resurrection will finally be complete. Our perishable bodies, our bodies with arthritis and heart disease, our bodies that are vulnerable to all kinds of accidents will finally be changed.

Paul says twice that we're going to be changed. Verse 51, we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed. For the trumpet shall sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed.

Whether we're dead or alive, when the last trumpet sounds, our resurrection is going to be complete. And what will that be like? It's a physical resurrection.

Never ever forget how wonderful the Christian future is. It's physical. We're not going to spend eternity as disembodied spirits.

[28 : 24] We are going to have a body. Bodies bring pain, but bodies also bring immense pleasure. All the pleasures of running and hearing and music and seeing and smelling and touching and eating and drinking and laughter, all those joys of being physical, all will be ours in a perfect body.

we will be just as God had always intended us to be. Doesn't that just reinforce the absolute poverty of our secular society?

You know, the poem most frequently read at funerals today is this. Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there, I do not sleep. I am the thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sunlight and ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn's rain. But that offers no hope, no comfort, nothing to look forward to.

We know our loved ones have died. We know they've gone. We want to see them again. We want to hold them again. We want to hug them again. How can you hug sunlight?

[29 : 39] How can you embrace autumn rain? We need bodily resurrection. And that is exactly the victory that Christ has won for us. And his victory at Calvary was so great that he's not just going to rescue our spirits from our failing bodies.

He's going to take our bodies and revive and restore and renew and give them back to us. Reunited body and spirit. Perfect in a body like his own glorious body.

No wonder Paul taunts death. He looks forward to the time we get our new bodies and he mocks death. Verse 55 Where, oh death, is your victory?

Where, oh death, is your sting? Death. You seem to have the victory. You were laughing at the graveside. You were smirking in the crematorium. You had the last word in the gravestone.

But as we rise, your victory has turned into ultimate defeat. Well, you say, that's great. But we still have to die.

[30 : 51] How do we face death now? Death is an enemy. Human beings don't want to die. We were made to live.

It's normal and healthy and right to want to live. It's only the most catastrophic mental collapse that makes us want to end our own lives. death. Make no mistake about it.

Death is an enemy. But here is the difference. Death is a defeated enemy. We go to meet an enemy who has already been defeated by Jesus Christ.

Where, oh death, is your sting? For Christians, death's sting has been drawn. We will never meet our sins again. Christ has taken our poison and the law has no claim on us.

Louis Berkhoff writes about Christians, the penal element is removed from death forever. Death can bite us, but the poison, the sting, is gone.

[31 : 58] Listen to what George Herbert, the 17th century Anglican poet, wrote about death. For where thou only wert before, an executioner at best, thou art a gardener now and more, an usher to convey our souls beyond the utmost stars and pools.

And there is the victory. Death, an executioner, becomes for Christians a gardener. And Herbert is taking the imagery from this very chapter.

Look at verse 42. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown, planted, is perishable. It is raised imperishable.

It is sown, planted, in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power. Death cannot destroy us.

He plants us to await the resurrection of our imperishable, glorious, powerful, new bodies. He is an usher.

[33 : 09] His worst only conducts us into the presence of our King and the loved ones who have gone before. Now he is still an enemy that we have got to face. But he is a defeated enemy.

He will bite us still, but his poison is gone. And one day, even the whole reality of death, will be swallowed up in victory.

Victory when? Victory now? The sting of death is gone? Victory not yet? We still await the final victory and physical resurrection.

In conclusion, verse 58. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Therefore, because, as a result of Christ's victory over death, sin in the law, Christ's victory at Calvary, Christ's victory now and not yet, your labour, your life, your work, your existence is not in vain.

[34 : 23] Let's then be steadfast, immovable, and always abound in the work of the Lord. Let's pray together. Almighty God, we are feeble and powerless, and we could never have been victorious over death and the grave, but we thank you that, through faith in Jesus Christ, through your amazing grace, you give us victory, through his pain, through his suffering, and through his death, you have won for us eternal life.

Our God, plant our feet firmly on the rock of your word, that one day we will live with you, that one day we shall say, death, where is your sting, grave, where is your victory? We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.