

Matt Kruse
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O Death, Where is your sting?
1 Corinthians 15:50-58
Series: Key Texts for Difficult Times

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in 1 Corinthians 15. If you were somehow limited to choose only one Sunday a year that you could gather with Christ's church to worship with them, you would most likely choose the gathering on Resurrection Sunday. If you have given any thought to the significance of the work of Christ, and if you truly know the new life given to those who have faith in Christ, then you couldn't imagine not being together with God's people on this Sunday. And yet, here we are – on a government mandated lockdown because of the Coronavirus pandemic. We all share the disappointment of not being together to worship our Lord with one voice this morning. But I want to pour the water of hope on the fires of our disappointment. And in that sense, there could not be a more appropriate or hope giving message than the message of Resurrection Sunday. The despair and disappointment of a crucified Savior is met by the overwhelming joy of his victory over the grave. It is certainly providential that the fourth week – the middle week – of our 8-week ban on large gatherings is this Sunday – Resurrection Sunday!

Not only is it providential, but it is also humanly ironic isn't it? I mean, just think about why we are banned from meeting with one another. I know there are many reasons, but they boil down to not overwhelming our health care systems so that more people can be treated so that they can keep living. And in all of our concern about living we can't help but focus on death and dying. The top headline on every news site is the latest death toll count and the latest count of how many have the virus. It is a confusing focus for a world that is usually pretty nonchalant about death, isn't it? That's been one of the most bewildering factors to me about this whole situation. In a world that makes light of death and often even celebrates it, we are now suddenly concerned for every human life – well, every life except for the pre-born life, those can continue to die – but every other life suddenly matters. As I've tried to make sense of it all, I think the universal fear of personal death is on display in a universal fashion like never before in our lifetime. People are not ready to die, and they are afraid to die – and so they are willing to give up as many freedoms as possible to guarantee that they don't die. Don't worry, I am not about to preach a political sermon on Easter about how we should be handling this pandemic differently. We must pray for our governmental leaders who face challenges none of us were ready for.

Rather, I say all of that to say that the Christian Gospel is the only true answer to the disease of death. With all of our concern about death and all of our desire for life, we must look to Jesus – who is the resurrection and the life. This is the message our world needs most today. They do not need the news of a coronavirus cure, or of a coronavirus vaccine, or even of a flattening of the curve. No, the message they need most is the message of hope that death has been defeated by Christ Jesus, and life is offered to all who would receive it by faith.

This is the message of 1 Corinthians 15. Not only is it Resurrection Sunday, but we are also in the middle of a series on Key Texts for Difficult Times. What texts contain the wonderful nuggets of truth that we need to sustain us in the darkest days? Well, one of those certainly has to be 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. It is one of the most hope-giving and life-guaranteeing texts in all of Scripture. It is a text whose light needs to shine brightly on the darkest paths of life. It says this. *Read 15:50-58.*

This 9-verse section comes at us as the climax of Paul's argument in this chapter. And what a climax it is! His argument throughout the chapter has been in defense of the gospel, meaning, it is a chapter filled with the only kind of hope that truly gives lasting hope. To understand the thoughts in these verses you need to understand a little bit of what he is countering. The church in Corinth has some among them who have bought into worldly philosophies and have mixed them with the truth about Christ. And by the way – whenever Christians do that it is never philosophy that gets cleaned up and sanitized by Christ, but it is always Christ who gets muddied by philosophy. And that is what is at stake in Corinth. If they continue down this path, they will lose the truth about Christ and therefore the hope of the Gospel. Some of them were saying that there was no resurrection from the dead. Now, they knew better than to deny the resurrection of Christ. They knew that if Christ didn't rise from the grave then there is no gospel. But they had bought into the Greek and Roman philosophies of their day who simply couldn't conceive of a bodily resurrection in the life to come for mankind. Not because they didn't think it was possible, but because they didn't think it would be good or right. And from an unbiblical worldview you can see how they could arrive at this thought. Everything we know in this world that is fleshly and physical and is associated with our bodies is decaying and filled with problems. So, if there is going to be any kind of paradise in the life to come, then wouldn't it make sense to have it be a spiritual and an immaterial paradise – a paradise on another plane – a higher life without the troubles of this life in a physical world. The way to attain to this nirvana was to shed the material parts of life for the immaterial – the mortal for the immortal. And the final peak to climb in that shedding of material badness for immaterial goodness was physical death. Once you ascended that peak and shed the material body you found your entrance into the immaterial afterlife.

And you could see how this could get Christianized can't you? Bring Jesus into that equation and now we get the freedom from all that is bad through the work of Christ and at death we enter into this glorious spiritual realm where we live forever with him – but without our physical body. Paul has told them in no uncertain terms that if you do this – if you believe that there is no resurrection from the dead – not just for Christ, but for all – then you empty the Gospel of its power, you make God a liar, you leave sinners in their sin, and Christians end up being the most truly pitiful people on the planet. But indeed, Christ has risen, and there is a coming resurrection for all. And this forms the backdrop for some of the most glorious verses in our New Testament, verses 50-58. In verse 50 we are presented with this insurmountable problem, and then in verses 51-54 we are given the grand solution to this insurmountable problem. And this leads Paul to this explosion of praise in verses 55-58. You can see how the text crescendos like a Bach masterpiece – leading us to the joyous proclamation – glory to God alone! To get to the top we have to start at the bottom – which is the sting of death.

I. **The Sting of Death – vs. 50, 55-56**

- a. That is the great problem Paul is addressing and giving the cure for – that death is a sting. He tells them in no uncertain terms in verse 50 that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Flesh and blood is clarified in the next phrase by that which is perishable. In other words, our physical bodies cannot inherit that which never passes away because they themselves are passing away. You cannot inherit something that will outlive you in the truest sense of inheritance. You cannot enter into a kingdom that will never end with all of its glorious blessings that will never pass away, if you yourself will pass away through death. The kingdom of God being referenced here is the eternal kingdom of God – the New Heaven and the New Earth where God will dwell with man and man with God. You can't go in there in your current state.
- b. So, what is the solution? Well, the philosophers of the day would tell the church in Corinth that the solution was to shed their flesh and blood bodies through death so that their immaterial parts could enter into the eternal kingdom of God. But that solution doesn't take the problem seriously enough. It doesn't consider the depth of the problem. It thinks that since death is obviously physical then the problem must be physical. But the Bible goes deeper here. The Lord tells us that we are passing away physically because we are bitten with the sting of death which is sin. That is the truth given in verses 55-56. By that point in the text Paul is rejoicing that the sting is dealt with, but don't miss that the sting is there. It is a sting that is taken care of only through the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the problem is so great that physical death cannot be the answer. The sting of death is our own sin. The poison that infects our mortal bodies is the poison of sin – and it is no respecter of persons. Our physical bodies are amazing specimens of life. On every front your physical body is designed to fight against the decay of death. And while it is successful so very often, it eventually is not. And that is not because God's design is faulty, but because sin is that powerful. And it is powerful because of the law of God. The law of God is not sinful or evil – no, it is good. But the law of God provokes the sinfulness of our hearts and we are provoked to sin more and more. And this rebellion against God in the human race increases the corruption of sin and its consequence, which is death. So, the answer to our human corruption cannot be the chief expression of that corruption. We cannot die to escape the corruption, when death is the chief evidence of that corruption within us. So, we need a better answer because we have a bigger problem.
- c. Someone has written the following about this problem of death – “There is a preacher of the old school, but he speaks as boldly as ever. He is not popular, though the world is his parish and he travels every part of the globe and speaks in every language. He visits the poor, calls upon the rich, preaches to people of every religion and no religion, and the subject of his sermon is always the same. He is an eloquent preacher, often stirring feelings which no other preacher could, and bringing tears to eyes that never weep. His arguments none are able to refute, nor is there any heart that has remained unmoved by the force of his appeals. He

shatters life with his message. Most people hate him; everyone fears him. His name? Death. Every tombstone is his pulpit, every newspaper prints his texts, and someday every one of you will be his sermon.”¹ This is the sting of death.

II. The Surety of Change – vs. 51-54

- a. But the sting of death is met by the surety of change in verses 51-54. Paul gives us the solution to the great sting of death – and guess what – it is not death itself. Death is not the escape, nor the hope, nor the shedding of everything that is bad. There is a better and more far reaching answer – and that is that we shall all be changed. Paul tells us a mystery in this part of the text. A mystery is an unfolding of truth previously unknown. He is unveiling for us some aspect of God’s plan that hasn’t yet been understood by God’s people before this time. And the mystery is that we will not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In other words, we will not all die. There will be a day that the trumpet sounds which will signal the end of this age of God’s grace and the dead in Christ will be resurrected and will go and meet him in the air. But, as 1 Thessalonians 4 tells us so clearly, we will not be left behind, if we are alive on that day. If we are in Christ, we too will be caught up in the air with him. And when we are caught up with him and with the dead who are resurrected and precede us – we will be changed. So, just take stock of the argument here. If you have to die in order to be freed from all that is wrong with you, then you have no hope when that last day finally appears and that last generation of God’s people don’t have to cross the river of death to get to the shore of eternal life. If death is the answer and they do not die, then they have no answer. But, if there is a different answer to the corruption, then there is hope. And there is a different answer – it is that we will all be changed – whether physically dead or physically alive at that moment.
- b. Notice two things about this change. It is instantaneous.
- c. *Instantaneous*
 - i. So, verse 52 says it will take place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The word for moment in the original is the word for atom – meaning that this is the smallest sliver of time that is indivisible. You can’t edit the time to any smaller segment – this is that one billionth of a second – that atomic level of time that can’t be any further separated. So, this change is not the long drawn out process of some spiritual metamorphosis. This is the instantaneous change in a moment. The twinkling of an eye is the smallest movement of the human eye. It is the lightning quick response of the eye to some new stimulus that is so fast it is indiscernible. That is how long it is going to take for God to bring about this change. And it is a change that will happen in that moment, both to those who are dead and to those who are alive. The dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed, he says in verse 52.
- d. *Incorruptible*

¹ As quoted in John MacArthur, *TMNTCS – 1 Corinthians*, pg. 441-442.

- i. And then in 53 he explains which kind of change this is going to be. It will be a complete overhaul. He's already told us that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, there must be a fundamental change. And that change is described as being from perishable to imperishable and from mortal to immortality. Both of those sets of words in the Greek are the same word with the alpha primitive on the front to signify a negation of the word. So, the word for mortal, which really means death, Thanatos, is coupled with the negation of that word athanasia – or the absence of mortality. And the same goes for perishable to imperishable.
- ii. So, this is a complete change from that which dies to that which is absent of death. From that which is perishable to that which can never perish!
- iii. And notice that it is the body – the physical body that puts this on in this moment of the last trumpet. This is not some mystical immaterial change. No, the physical body is transformed and changed from that which will die, or has already died, to that which can never die. And what will that changed body be like? Well, there is a lot of speculation about that, but back in verses 37-43 it was likened to the difference between a seed placed in the ground and the stalk of wheat that the seed produces. The seed is the physical body before this change, and the beautiful stalk of wheat which it produces is likened to the glorified body given in this moment's notice. In other words, it will have similarities, but the change will be beyond our current ability to imagine. If you saw a seed of wheat without ever having seen what it can produce if you placed it in the ground, you would be shocked the first time you saw that stalk rise up in all of its glory. So, it will be, only in eternally more glorious ways with this resurrected and glorified body.
- iv. And notice that at the end of verse 54 Paul says this will fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 25:8 where it promises that on that day “death will be swallowed up in victory.” This is a crucial promise being made here. This is not just an end to death – a ceasing of the carnage that sin's consequence brings. This is not God finally lifting the force of corruption that is ripping through humanity faster than a tornado in a trailer park. He is not simply stopping the problem. No, at this moment of change death is not just stopped – it is completely swallowed up. It is dealt its own death blow and it is completely and totally destroyed. All the damage it has caused is fixed and renewed. And this is not some novice handyman kitchen makeover job. No, this is the Extreme Makeover – better than you could ever have imagined it could be edition! This is a complete fix of all that is corrupt and dying or already dead. As has been rightly said, there is nothing wrong with me that a good resurrection won't fix!
- e. So, the sting of death is the curse of sin which corrupts us and destroys us. But the answer to all that ails us is this moment of change that will happen at the last trumpet. We shall all be changed! And this leads then, to the shout of victory in verses 55-58.

III. The Shout of Victory – vs. 55-58

- a. These verses encapsulate the glorious truths which fill your heart with joy every Resurrection Sunday morning. This is why you long to be with God's people rejoicing in God's Son – because you know these words are true! Paul has been proving throughout the whole chapter that the resurrection is true and it is completely necessary. And by that I mean, he has assumed the truth of Jesus' resurrection, and based upon Jesus' resurrection he has argued for our resurrection. Having proven his point, he now exults in the fact. Death's power has been vanquished and it has been defeated. It no longer can claim victory. And that is quite the statement. This is not like saying that the Chiefs finally found a way to overcome the dominance of the Patriots and become the best team in the AFC and in the NFL. No, this is a much greater reversal here. Death has never not won! Death has never been defeated. It is the all-time worldwide reigning champ in every weight class and in every fighting division. It is the best athlete in every category – to continue with that analogy. It has never lost an event. It overcomes in every age bracket – no one is too young to die, and no one is too old to die. No one is too strong to die or too weak to die. No one is too healthy or too sick. When death comes it cannot be overcome.
- b. But, when that moment comes of Christ's return and the dead in Christ rise first, and we who remain are caught up together with him – we will all be changed. We who are mortal will put on immortality, and we who are perishable will put on that which is imperishable. And so, Paul can rightly gloat over death that it is swallowed up in victory. And he can even trash talk death here – where you at death? Where's your victory now huh? Where's that stinger that has bitten every human who has ever lived? What's that? Speak up so the people in the back can hear – you lost? You're defeated? That's right! You're defeated! You have no more power, no more victories, no more universal reign over all!
- c. Did you notice that the verbs here are translated as present? Death is swallowed up in victory. This is presented here as a present reality. It is actually an aorist verb in the Greek which means it is a past event with a recurring or ongoing result. But beloved, if you are thinking at all here, you are wondering why this isn't a future tense verb – death will be swallowed up in victory. Because, you look at our world today and you know that death is still winning. It is still on its great victory lap around the globe! Christians still have to have funerals and grieve the loss of loved ones. Your own appointed hour is lurking in the shadows. So, what gives?
- d. Well, Paul is not looking at the current reality of death's victory, but rather he is looking at the current reality of Christ's victory over death. And he says that in verse 57. This is a present tense verb that God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, this victory we have over death is a gift from God given to us presently through His Son. This is not something we earn or accomplish. This is not some higher plan of immaterial existence or some higher achievement of religious practice. No, this is a victory given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. But how is that possible? If the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the

law – how can any of us be freed from death’s victory when in fact we are all sinners. We have all been bitten by the serpent of sin and we have its venom coursing through our bloodstream, and it will kill us. So, how can we be given victory over sin and its consequence? Look back at the beginning of the chapter – to verses 3-5. Paul closes the chapter where he started the chapter – the great good news of the work of Jesus Christ. *Read 15:3-5.*

- e. This Gospel has two core facts that are attested to by two core witnesses. The first fact is that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. And the witness to that fact is that he was buried. The second core fact is that Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. And the witness to that fact is that he appeared to all of the people listed in verses 5-9. Now we are told at the end of the chapter that we can have the gift of victory over death in which we who are perishable are made eternally imperishable and we who are corruptible are made eternally incorruptible. And that is possible through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is because he died for our sins and was buried and was raised on the third day and appeared to these eyewitnesses. He did not die for his own sins, but he died for our sins. On Friday night we saw from Luke 23 that he was guiltless in every way. There was nothing about him that would condemn him to death. Pilate says that, Herod says that, Pilate’s wife says that, Judas says that, the thief on the cross next to him says that, the centurion overseeing his crucifixion says that, and most importantly – the testimony of Scripture says that. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. As Galatians 3 says, he took the curse of the Law and sin upon himself so that we could be redeemed.
- f. But is this victory over death given to everyone who has ever lived and died? Is this a universal gift to all? Turn with me to Revelation 20 – Revelation chapter 20. At the end of the end – the Bible tells us that God will bring the full and final end to death. This is the unfolding of the truth given to us in 1 Corinthians 15. This is how it will all get worked out in the future. After the Great Tribulation and the Millennial Kingdom – this is how death’s final defeat will come. *Read Rev. 20:11-15.*
- g. So, death and hades will be finally and fully defeated and thrown into the eternal lake of fire – never to have dominion again. And those whose names are not written in the book of life will also be thrown into this lake of fire with death and hades. In other words – this is the second death – the final and eternal death. How do you know then if you will have eternal life or eternal death on that day of judgment?
- h. Do you remember when Mary and Martha were mourning the death of their brother Lazarus in John 11. Jesus came and he had this conversation with Martha before he raised Lazarus from the grave. They are in that moment confronted with death in this life and Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again, and Martha says, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus does not correct her and say – no Martha, he will be raised from the dead in

just a few minutes. Rather, he teaches her the truth behind that truth of the final resurrection. He says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26)

- i. In other words – you will live on that final day – you will be raised incorruptible and immortal on that day if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Death is conquered in him for those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ? So many people believe in Jesus in a social distancing kind of way. They believe in him from a safe distance. They agree with the facts about his death, burial, and resurrection. And they even find themselves delighted internally and emotionally that God would do this for them. But they keep Jesus in the safe zone of their lives. They keep their distance while believing in him from afar – like the crowds of the Gospels. But that is not what is being commanded here – you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved from the sting of death. And by that the Scriptures mean you must see the desperation of your condition and you must run to Jesus as the only possible cure – for indeed he is. You must fall at his feet seeking for his saving grace and mercy. You must cry out to him pleading with him for the forgiveness of your sins and the redemption that comes through his shed blood. And friend you must know – that he has never yet turned one sinner away who seeks him in repentance and faith. He loves sinners, and he only loves sinners – so seek forgiveness from him and from him forgiveness you will find!
- j. Imagine that you came down with the coronavirus and became quite ill. Would you not at some point realize that this disease was more than you can handle, and it required better medicine that you have at home and better medical skill than your dear family can provide you? Wouldn't you at that moment seek out the best solution possible – the best hospital with the best doctors with the best equipment to give you the best care to overcome this horrific disease? Of course you would. And you wouldn't stand outside the door and listen to what they told you to do to treat yourself. No, you would enter into the door of the hospital with humble dependence upon whatever they wanted to do with you. If they told you to take a drug you would take it. If they said they had to intubate you on a ventilator you would let them – because you want to live – and rightly so! Like this – have faith in Christ! Your sin disease is greater than you can manage and it will kill you. There is only one Doctor who has the cure! But praise God there is a cure!
- k. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion: There is great comfort and hope in this glorious truth for sure. But there is also compelling motivation for the abounding Christian life. That is how Paul ends his shout of praise in 1 Corinthians 15. Like a good spiritual shepherd, he can't rejoice in spiritual truth without applying it to how we should live every day. And so, he ends with a charge to the beloved to be steadfast and immovable in this truth. Don't budge an inch on the gospel truth of what Christ has done and of what this means for our future resurrection. And because this is

always true you can now live a different way than anyone else. You can give yourself completely to the work of the Lord knowing that it will never be in vain. If you seek first the kingdom of God you can be sure that your sacrificial and costly work will be used by God to accomplish his purposes and it will not be in vain because it will be the only thing that truly lasts on the final day. Christian – the Lord has given you this gift of a pause to most of life’s busyness. You can’t help but think about and evaluate what you have really made your life all about. I wonder, are you living with all in, self-sacrifice, immovable posture commended to us in verse 58? Are you abounding in the work of the Lord? Are gladly spending and being spent for Christ? Even if you were to die doing it – there could be no greater way to die! As Nate Saint once wrote – “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose!” Let’s pray!