

We come again to the book of 1 Corinthians. We're finishing the chapter of 1 Corinthians, 15, the most condensed chapter in all of Scripture talking about the resurrection and its implications. We've been here for a few weeks, and Pastor Flora last week left us with the great reality that our union with Christ supersedes our union with Adam. That the work of Christ on the cross and his victory over sin and death—this One from heaven taking on a human body—rescues us from the curse, the curse of sin, the curse of our broken nature. And we will be born in the likeness of the man from heaven, and it will be very new and very glorious. But he is leading us to the crescendo of his argument. Why, in fact, was Paul teaching on this very subject? Why was it so important? It is because he wants to lead them to the assurance of triumph. But a triumph based and rooted in Jesus Christ alone. Not in themselves, not in their understanding, not in their bodies. But an assurance and a triumph rooted in Christ alone. So we turn this morning to 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

Hear now God's glorious word.

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 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."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, 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.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this powerful word that has been read at many a funeral, but that you intend to be a message for the living. We pray, Father, that through the work of your Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross and through his victory over sin and death on that Easter Sunday morning, that it would come powerfully home to us. And that you would do this by your Holy Spirit, that your Spirit would be praying for us, that your Spirit would be working mightily with the word, giving us an assurance of the triumph that is in Christ alone, a triumph over everything, because it is a triumph over sin and death. Give us this hope, give us this assurance for your praise and for the work of the Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul ends in these eight verses where he began in the first eight verses of this chapter. He ends with the words that I just read: to stand firm, let nothing move you, giving yourself to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor is not in vain. He says this because he has just finished giving them the power, the energy, the ground upon which all of the work of the Lord is grounded. He's just given us all the power and the ground for the preaching of the gospel. This is what he gives us in the opening verses of this very same chapter where he says, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand." He then says, "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." And from that point he defends his ministry, and then he unpacks the very thing which he had received and now he is passing on to them, that has also been passed on to them by other preachers, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ through the truth of the resurrection. Not just the resurrection of Jesus Christ in bodily form, but that then therefore the resurrection of all those who believe in Jesus Christ—not to a spiritual resurrection, that somehow we'll be caught up in the clouds forever as some sort of disembodied souls floating around in whatever cosmos we may dream of—but rather embodied souls with flesh and blood, new bodies with a new heavens and a new earth. And he wants to establish

this as a ground upon which his ministry finds its strength and power. He's driving them to find assurance in the triumph of Christ, and that is where he would lead us.

So this morning we're going to look at these eight verses through these three points: Flesh and Blood, Victory of Victories, and Get on with it! Flesh and Blood, Victory of Victories, Get on with it!

Flesh and Blood. This has been an argument that Paul has been going on for nearly the entire chapter. That which is now will be transformed to that which is not yet. And he does, in verses 50 through 53, address the problem of the perishable, and comparing it to that which is imperishable. He compares in these few verses very tightly. He also addresses in other words that which is mortal that which will inherit immortality. But he begins by using this phrase, "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God..." Therein lies, in those first few words, the framework in which he's going to unpack over the next few verses. The framework is this: the framework is we have flesh and blood---this present body---and this present body cannot inherit the kingdom that is to come. He then unpacks it in different ways, through perishable, imperishable, mortal to immortality. Do you see the framework?

And so what he wants to do is to give us an unpacking of what he means by flesh and blood, though it seems like a somewhat vague phrase, I think he's pointing to this: By 'flesh and blood' he's literally pointing to our present body, this present flesh that you see standing before you, and you sitting before me. This present body, he is in essence by pointing to its flesh and its blood, the fact that it is not capable of inheriting the kingdom that is to come, is basically summarizing it in these words: This present body is given to death, weakness, and decay. It is not suited for the world that is to come. That when Christ returns and the new heavens and the new earth will be known and the kingdom is laid bare for all to see and we will see Jesus Christ as he is, which Paul says later, "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"---that world cannot be entered into with this present body. I think about it through this way: He is in essence saying that we have with this present body blue jeans and a t-shirt. And you can't walk into a black tie affair in blue jeans and a t-shirt. It's not fitted for the occasion. In fact, this text is telling us that it's going to be a suit and tie occasion where if you're wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt you will not even be given entrance into the doorway. It has no place. And let's be honest about this, as I was having a conversation with someone between the services today. Let's press it a little farther. That maybe you happen to like your blue jeans and t-shirt. Maybe you think you're in good health. Maybe you can run a three-hour marathon—or less. Maybe you can just run a marathon. Maybe you are pretty or handsome by the world's standards. Regardless of what beauty, regardless of what physical strength you may have, it is all rotting flesh. How's that for a pick-me-up? But Paul's saying that no matter how you view yourself and your body or other people's bodies, even the most beautiful and handsome in the world will pale in comparison to that which will be in glory.

These bodies are not suited for the kingdom that is to come. He tells us this, that just in case we're wondering, he says of course the dead—now note, the message is for the living and those who are already dead when he tells us these great words: Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep...meaning we will not all die...but we will all be changed. Some will be living when Christ comes again. And when he comes again, all those who are living will be transformed in the twinkling of an eye and at the sound of the last trumpet. But guess what, so will the dead. Do you see the equalizing? The bodies that are laid in the grave are no worse off—or better—than that which you see sitting before you. None of it can inherit the kingdom. But, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the last trumpet—Paul's not talking about the chronology of the Eschaton, of the end times, of exactly how it's all going to go down, but it's going to go down, and when it does everything will be changed, because he's pointing to God's power. God's power. God's renewing, restoring, redemptive power will make his children's bodies new. And that's what he wants these Corinthians to hear.

But not just flesh and blood, it's also more than just this present body I think he is trying to confront. I believe what he's also confronting in this entire argument is the present mindset of the Corinthians

themselves. You see, the Corinthians were denying the in-flesh, bodily resurrection of the Christian at Christ's return. They believed in a resurrection, but that resurrection would be a spiritual resurrection. So that it would be this...just a soul-embodied existence. And so they believed, therefore, in a resurrection, but it was a partial resurrection, it was not a biblical resurrection. And interesting, they somehow believed themselves to be spiritually to have arrived. Over and over again, throughout the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is pointing to how they have puffed themselves up. They've puffed themselves up. They believe that they had arrived spiritually. They believe that they were strong. They believe that because they understood, or their understanding of the coming of the Holy Spirit, living the life of the Spirit, had somehow enabled them to reach a place spiritually where they could begin to be puffed up about their knowledge, their gifts, their worship practices. And this is something, as you go throughout the letter, is a consistent theme throughout the whole thing that Paul continually wants to remind them---you have not arrived. It's not about your strength. It's not about your victory. It's not about your spiritual abilities. In fact, I am weak. And I want to tell you, to understand the letter to the Corinthians, if you misunderstand that central argument between the Corinthian church and Paul, you will have missed so much of what he has to say, and it is this: They could not stand that Paul talked about his weaknesses. The fact that he gloried in his weakness--and he would say in the second letter "that my power is made perfect in weakness"--is something that they found so difficult to comprehend because they viewed themselves in their mindset as having arrived, strong, triumphant. But Paul says, not only is this flesh and blood not going to be able to inherit the kingdom of God, neither will that mindset. You haven't arrived. That's why he could look at his weakness. And he said, 'I glory in my weakness'--- why? Because Christ's power is made manifest in my weakness. Therefore my strength and my rest is not in me, it's in Christ alone. He was confronting their spiritual strength as well. And I believe he's telling us something there about those who understand that they need the resurrection power, the redemptive power of Christ at work in their lives. And what he's telling us is, it's not the strong and the successful that often get this first. It's often those who are the weakest in our midst. And is it any surprise that he welcomes children. Is it any surprise that many of his miracles...it is women who are often the first witnesses to his miracles. And I believe that is true today. Look around the world where the church is growing the quickest. It is in the nations that the western world sees as the weakest, the poorest, the least technological, the least advanced. Why? Because they need a crutch? No. They get it. The world is profoundly broken. I am broken. Lord, help me in my weakness. Which is why they're now sending missionaries to us. It is because this present body, this flesh and blood, this mind, this understanding is ill suited for the world and the Christ who is coming again. Paul wants to take them there. And he does it by demonstrating that the gospel--the glorious victory of Christ--exposes that even our finest works are rags before this glorious God.

And that is where he takes us next. This Victory of Victories. In verses 54 through 57 Paul unpacks a couple of things to show us this Victory of Victories that is in Christ alone. He first tells us of two directions that he is looking at, and he does this by two directions: 'The already and the not yet.' What do I mean. Look at the 'already.' He says in verse 54, "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.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" So what he does is, he looks into the future. And the future comes rushing into the present, and he says, 'already' because of what is to come, because death, of what has happened in the past--Jesus' death on the cross, his victory over sin and death in the resurrection--he can now look at death and say, where is your strength. Watch this. Therefore he is saying that death does not hold power over the dead, even. Death does not have victory because of what is to come. And that gives a confidence and an assurance in the present.

But he also has something to say about not what is 'already' but also about what is 'not yet.' He talks about the future but he does it in the present tense when he says these words, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Though Christ has not been revealed again in his second coming, he claims victory in the now. Even though there is plenty of 'not yet' to come. He means to say if death does not hold power over the

dead, death does not hold power over the living. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting. He is driving us to look at the heart of the matter. That our very natures are profoundly broken because of sin, which is the sting of death.

And then he tells us about the law which energizes sin. Paul, in telling us about the Victory of Victories, he's not just telling about the two directions that there is already a present hope and there is so much to look forward to, he is also telling us about the final triumph. That the final triumph is not somewhere off just in the future—it's already been announced. Its effect is already taking place. And it's when he says these words: The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. What is he saying? What brings death? It is sin. What is sin? Sin is rebellion against a holy God. And this has been a part of his argument the entire chapter--that our forefather Adam, wanting to be his own god, wanting to set his own course, chose his own way instead of God's, and therefore rebelled against God and fell into sin. And therefore death came to him. Our bodies are going to death because of sin. Not action. Sinful actions are an outgrowth of a sinful nature. It is hard-wired into our system. It is in the blood. It is a sting. And he then points us to Christ when he says, "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." He's saying, Jesus gives us victory over the sting, and over its power which is the law.

What does he mean? This was illustrated to me a few years ago when I was in my first pastorate in Florida. There was a small farming community just to our north called Punta Gorda, which means 'Fat Point.' There's not much there, but there's one guy who lived there. He was called 'The Snake Man.' I don't even remember his real name. And I don't even know if he's still alive. But the Snake Man was famous because he had the largest collection of the most venomous snakes in the world. And he would take these snakes and do, you know, demonstrations around the world, but also around southwest Florida. And I saw videos of this guy and heard his story. And he didn't just have a collection of the most poisonous snakes, to work with those kind of snakes—obviously—high risk job. And so what he did was, he would inject himself with their venom. In so doing, he built up a tolerance to the point where his very blood would serve as an anti-venom for those who had been bitten by snakes—venomous snakes. And in one day alone in the 1970's he received the Presidential Seal--I don't know what the award was, but for bravery, it's not that important. But the President honored him. Why? Because in one day, in the same hospital, his blood was donated to two victims of two separate snake bites. And it was the donation of his blood that saved their lives. He wouldn't have been able to do that unless he was allowing himself to be stung. Now, it's an imperfect analogy, as are all analogies, but work with me. Christ Jesus came down, not on a tour, but he came down to a brood of vipers. And though he had no sin in him, he was willing to take on himself our sin, and he willingly faced death so that by his blood we would be made clean. By his death we would gain the victory. But it's not just over sin, it is also the law. The law is holy, the law is good, but sin pre-dated the law. But when the law came, the Bible tells us, that the law of God's perfect standard exposes—what?—just how sinful I am. So the law didn't just magically go away when Jesus appeared on the earth. Rather, the law was there. Jesus, in his life, though perfect, obeyed the law perfectly. Thereby fulfilling the law, thereby removing its power. So through Christ, a Christian—and if you are not a Christian you can experience this today, you can experience the freedom from the sting of death which is sin, but also you can receive the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ in your place. Because you'll never be able to obey enough, you'll never be able to grovel enough, you'll never be able to apologize enough to earn your way towards God. You'll never be able to work hard enough to do it. But it is Christ in whom there is victory over sin and death and the law which exposes it. Because he has solved it, he has satisfied it, he has taken on God's righteous punishment for sin. This is the glorious nature of this Victory of Victories: His blood, his sacrifice, his living, his death---but oh, according to 1 Corinthians 15, his resurrection. That is our hope.

However. You can believe everything that I just said and yet miss what it means to live by this very triumph. And therefore it would have been easy for Paul to simply stop at verse 57. But he does not. In verse 58 he says to us what is his command, "Get on with it," when he says, "Therefore, my dear brothers, 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.” It is not in vain because he’s coming again. And that which we sow, we will reap. That which we do for the Lord he will acknowledge and he will multiply. He will use it for his own glory. So there is a life to live. But there is, I think, this idea of getting on with it. To not be moved, to stand firm has both a personal and a corporate application.

Let me begin with the personal. I want to finish the thought that I just said earlier. It is completely possible to believe everything I said up to verse 57 but then sort of stumble our way into verse 58. What do I mean by that. And I put myself at the head of the list here. There are so many Christians today, and here, I think, particularly among the younger generations, who are so cynical even though they’re Christians. There is so much cynicism in our culture and in our lives that it robs us of what this can do for us personally. Let me quote a writer who says this:

We are tired of counting bodies in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are tired of CIA leaks and government scandals. We are tired of empty campaign promises and embezzled funds. We are tired of FEMA and mismanaged bureaucracy. We are tired of hurricanes and earthquakes and falling stock market prices. We are tired of HIV, AIDS, TB and other acronymic diseases. We are tired of starving children and anorexic celebrities. We are tired of school shootings and inner city crime. We are tired of debating evolution in schools and abortion in the courts. We are tired of HMOs and insurance companies and a broken health care system. We are tired of divorces in our homes and grappling for grades in our schools. We are tired of griping bosses and sniping co-workers. We are tired of searching for someone who will like us for who we are and not for who we pretend to be. We are tired of hypocrisy and judgment in the church from whom we have expected to receive grace. We are tired of disappointments which happen all the time. But what option is there left for us? We aren’t revolutionaries. We know the world too well to expect it to change. We aren’t saints. We know ourselves too well to expect change there, either.

And the writer then comes to his cynical conclusion. This is a professing believer who was confronting his own cynicism that, I would argue, was causing him to move away from his hope and getting on with the work of the Lord because he was so blinded by his cynicism. This is what he says. He says,

In my cynicism I began to get addicted with simply announcing the world as I saw it, not as how I hoped it would be. There is nothing to fear from a description, nothing to be surprised by, nothing to be disappointed by. And so I would stand here and tell you that 18,000 children die each day from hunger, that you can’t trust anyone else or even yourself, which means you should certainly never trust a politician, and that you can’t do something, you can’t get something for nothing, that you can’t find a good church or even good people these days, that justice is a joke, that peace is a sham, that everything is broken, and that nothing is sacred or perfect or mildly decent.

Now let me say I believe there are a whole lot of Christians who believe Corinthians chapter 15, verses 1 to 57, but when it comes to getting on with it, either personally or corporately, cynicism has often crippled us. And we have become very good at describing the world as we see it instead of imagining the power of a victorious Christ breaking out in a human heart, breaking out in a church—as imperfect as we are—to bring about the world that we pray for. If all we have is cynicism, what hope do we lay out to the world? What hope do we lay out to one another? Paul would have none of it. And he says to the individual first--here’s what we need to hear--Do not be moved either by your circumstances or your temptations.

What do I mean? In a few moments we’re going to sing a hymn, very familiar. It is called, “It is well with my soul.” Many of you have sung this hymn hundreds of times, maybe thousands of times. Hear these words:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”
Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blessed assurance control:
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

And there are those in this room who sing that hymn today because you know in the brokenness of your bodies, in the brokenness of your relationships, you are feeling the acute pain. And what you need to hear is that it is only the resurrection, it is only Christ's victory over the sting of death which is sin and over death itself, will give you the strength and the hope to face your circumstances. The one who wrote this hymn, his circumstances were not changed, but Christ entered into them with the victory of Christ.

But also we must be careful that we don't make our hope of the assurance of the victory in Christ contingent on our circumstances, but we must also be careful that we are not moved and we must take our stand against Satan who wants to tempt us to believe we are not worthy of that victory. I found this hymn. I found what I think to be even maybe all of its verses, but it's these words that gripped me personally, and I want it to grip you personally. He writes:

I hear the accuser roar
of ills that I have done.
I know them well and thousands more--
Jehovah findeth none.

Let me say, how could Paul, an accuser and persecutor of the church, stand before the church which he once persecuted and say 'I glory in my weakness.' Why? It was because though many could count his sins, and he could count them more, Jehovah—Jesus Christ—in him, God finds none. You will never be worthy, because we were never worthy. And in that is the glorious praise of the church. Stand firm. Do not be moved, because the one who has died is the one who is coming again—all of him, Victory of Victories.

But it is also for the church. That the church of Jesus Christ is not just filled up of individuals who have received grace and that is enough. A guiding illustration for me, a guiding picture for me is the church of Jesus Christ is to be a colander. And the faucet of divine grace never dries up. And it is always pouring into the church of Jesus Christ and flowing out through hundreds and thousands and millions of holes. That this grace is to flow out into the world. That we are to be about the work of the Lord. And that work of the Lord Jesus Christ is not done in vain because he uses it, he works through it, and even sometimes he works in spite of it, but he still calls us to work. What is that work?

Preach the gospel. Preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, day in, day out.

Give an answer for the hope that you have within you that Jesus Christ has come. But more than that, it is not just preaching the gospel, it is also caring for the widows and the poor and the hungry in our midst and those to whom God is calling us. But note, I say, it is both and not one or the other. There are so many within our day who would have us to believe that all we're called to do is simply preach the gospel. There are those today within the church who say, no, we need to be about social justice. But both are missing the point: They are inextricably connected to one another. That if we have a cup of soup in the right hand, we must be willing to have the gospel in the left. That if we have the gospel in the left, we must maybe need to have a hammer in the right to nail some nails. Maybe what needs to be the ministry of presence for those who are hurting in our very neighborhoods. In other words, we are called to do the work of the gospel in word and deed together because Jesus Christ came in word and deed as the Word and the Deed, who has rescued us from sin and death to send us out to make disciples of all nations.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this glorious message of the assurance of the triumph that is ours in Jesus Christ. May you work that in every heart this morning. For those, Lord, who doubt that this could be true, may you display in their hearts a grace that is irresistible. May you show them your loving kindness--that God so loved. We thank you for your Son who is our Victor, who has given us the victory of victories. And may you send us out, one and all, as individuals and together, to live out this glorious gospel. Help us we pray, by your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.