

The Victory of Jesus

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[0 : 00] For our New Testament reading, we're going to read two portions of 1 Corinthians chapter 15. We're going to read some from the beginning of the chapter and some from the end.

It's a long chapter. If you get a chance, you can read it. It's really focusing on the central truth of the resurrection. No resurrection, no hope. If Jesus is not raised, we are not raised.

Our hope, our faith is futile, and we are actually to be pitied more than all others. But yet, Jesus was raised, and in his resurrection, we have hope.

Hope in the face of death and hope beyond death. So let's hear the opening words of 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and the closing words of that same chapter.

So from verse 1, 1 Corinthians chapter 15, 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 Cephas and then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also as to one abnormally born.

[1 : 50] For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Whether then it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. And we're now going to read from the same chapter, chapter 15, and we'll pick up at the end sort of the application of this reality. Jesus is raised, we too look forward to resurrection.

Verse 50, I declare to you, brothers and sisters, 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 and 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 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. Amen, and may God bless these readings from his word, from the old, from the new.

We read in Psalm 118 of shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous. We read that death has been swallowed up in victory. Now, I don't usually tell you what the Greek or the Hebrew words are, but in this particular case, you might be familiar with the Greek word for victory, even if you didn't know that's what it meant. But the shoe and sporting goods manufacturer, I think you say Nike here, we say Nike in America, that means victory. That's the Greek word for victory.

[4 : 42] Now, when you're translating, or if you're living in a different culture, you quickly realize that much is lost in translation. That much just doesn't equate one to another, whether you're looking at language or whether you're looking at culture. When I lived in Japan, there were certain obvious examples. The food, most of the food translates very well. The main course, sushi, or all the different types of food that you would have for your main course. But Japanese sweets, unless, I mean, the idea of sweetened soybean paste wrapped in kind of a glutinous jelly. I mean, if that appeals to you, then you'll love Japanese sweets. But basically, it tastes as good as it sounds. It

doesn't taste that good because it doesn't sound that good. But that's something that often Westerners would say, I love Japanese food, but I don't like Japanese sweets. The opposite we also found was when we were trying as teachers, one of the most difficult lessons was the lesson on idiom. You know, English, you know, that we use, or I remember teaching a lesson and, you know, teaching the phrase, it's raining cats and dogs. Now, in English, I don't ever say, I mean, I know what it means,

I don't ever say it, but you just can't translate that from one language to another because people are going to be looking up and saying, is that what happens in your culture? And you say, no, no, that's not. So we're kind of used to the fact that when you go east to west or when you go north to south, when you cross linguistic divides, things kind of don't really cross those divides.

But when they do, there's something significant. When you have an image or a metaphor, when you have an illustration that works in two very different settings, I think that's significant. I think it's significant because it reminds us that there's something universal here. There's something that reminds us that we are not dealing just with one culture or one people. The example I'd like to highlight is the idea of a palm branch. You see, in the Greek culture, the palm was associated with the Olympic Games. If you won a race, if you won a wrestling match, if you won a contest, you, the winner, would be given a laurel crown and you would be given a palm branch to hold in your hand. That would signify victory. But this image also works in the Jewish context. In Leviticus, we see Leviticus 23, when the festival of the tabernacles is described. The booths are to be made and palm branches, the foliage of luxurious trees were to be used. And the palm also within the Jewish culture would be a symbol to a victory. So when you have these crossover images, there are then, you fast forward to the New

Testament, and you realize that as you read these key passages in the New Testament, they connect with very different cultures and very different backgrounds because they're saying the same thing.

They're not lost in translation, but they're clear in the Greek and Roman culture and in the Jewish culture, which really in the ancient world, that means everybody. You put those two together, Jew and Gentile, and they get it. When you come to the New Testament, there are only two passages in which palm branches are mentioned. The first one is quite understandable. The first one is in John chapter 12, and this is why we call the triumphal entry of Jesus, occurred on Palm Sunday. The other three Gospels mention branches, but it's only John's Gospel that mentions that they're palm branches. John chapter 12, verse 12, the next day, the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel. So from a Jewish context and from a Greek context, here is a welcome that is fit for a victorious warrior king. Now of course we know that the triumphal entry, Palm Sunday, was a preview of coming attractions. It wasn't the victory itself, but Jesus was coming into Jerusalem to achieve this great and final victory. But the palm branches were very suitable, were they not? A welcome fit for a king, an honor fit for a victorious warrior.

[9 : 39] But as I mentioned, in the Olympic Games, only one gets the palm. Only one gets the wreath of laurel. Only one gets the palm branch. I don't think there was a gold or I don't think there was a silver or a bronze medal. I don't think I might be wrong. At least Google didn't tell me this. But I don't think there were second place and third place prizes like we're accustomed to at the modern Olympics.

So you have the palms spread out before Jesus, prefiguring the victory that he would win. Remember, Jesus came to conquer. He came to conquer sin and he defeated sin. He came to conquer evil and he overcame evil. He came to conquer death and he vanquished death. Even on the cross itself, we see that indication of his victory. It is finished, he said, on the cross, paid in full. Your debt, my debt, satisfied.

Now the second mention of the second and only mention of the palm branch in the New Testament occurs in Revelation chapter 7. And this one is not so easy to understand. Not so easy apart from the insight that were given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. We'll come back to that in just a minute. Revelation 7, you might have guessed it already. After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count. From every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

I'm just back from camp, Renfrew Senior Camp. Donald Forsyth and myself were among the more senior leaders. Karis Little was among the more junior leaders. So Buclew was well represented at camp.

And we had a Vietnam night. Martin Patterson, his wife Jennifer, their children Luke and Josh and Sophia, they are serving with OMF in Hanoi. And they came and spoke with the young people. They told the young people that the population of Vietnam is 100 million. The population of Hanoi is 10 million.

[12 : 02] Hanoi was the northern, or the capital of North Vietnam is, you know, from an old Vietnam War scenario. Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon in the south is a little bit larger, 12 million. And it's a very young population.

There's a million students in Hanoi out of a population of 10 million, which is a huge amount. And I remember reading this at the meeting, because Martin was mentioning that in Vietnam, there's a majority people group, the king people, they are 85% of the population. And there are 53 minority groups. Now a passage like Revelation 7 tells us that on that great day, all of those people groups will be represented. All of those different tribes will be present in that place, on that occasion. But what I want to stress to you tonight is not just the variety, which there will be, not just the multiplicity, you can't count them, but notice the imagery here. That each one of this innumerable multitude has the same clothing and has the same accessory. They're wearing the same clothes, they're wearing robes, and they have in their hands palm branches. Now that's where the classical image breaks down. Because one contest, one victor, one palm branch. Now there's one contest, one victor, and a multitude of people holding the palm branches. How is it that each one of these people is numbered as the victor when only one won the contest? Well, if you turn back to that passage that we read from chapter 15 in 1 Corinthians, we're told that death and the grave brings a sting. And it seems as if death had a 100% success rate. Now I know of Enoch and Elijah, I know there were two who were taken from earth without death. Let's call those the exceptions. The rule is life is followed by death. And he died, and he died, and he died, and he died. There seems to be a monotonous pattern here.

You live and you die, you live and you die. Now Jesus has come to take the sting out of death. Jesus has come to vanquish and to defeat the grave. Jesus has come to over, to turn the tables so that death no longer has the final word. So that evil no longer seems to have the final victory. And that the wages of sin does not constantly bring about the inevitable conclusion, death and sting and sorrow. The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, Paul tells us. But thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. When we read the New Testament, we are constantly confronted with key terms that bring us back to key events. What happened on Friday, the Good Friday event, we describe as the atonement, where there is now a coming together, a reconciliation, an atoning, where God who is high and lifted up, holy, holy, holy, holy, and a people who are sinful in act, in word, and in thought, a holy God and a sinful people are somehow brought together. And as you read through the New Testament, the words that are used are so many and so varied. Words like sacrifice, words like reconciliation, words like ransom or redemption, words like justification, words like propitiation, words like peace, and words like victory.

[16 : 09] All of these words point to the event, point to the contest, but they point to them in a different way. For example, the word reconciliation. If you look at 2 Corinthians chapter 5, the Apostle Paul tells us that the ministry of the gospel is the ministry of reconciliation. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. You see, God has so planned the work of Jesus that he who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. So reconciliation is a relationship word.

Estrangement, sin brings separation, the gospel brings reconciliation. Enemies become friends, opponents become allies. Opponents become allies. The word victory is a battlefield word. You see, there are many and varied enemies in the Christian life. The Bible tends to highlight three with consistent emphasis. There is an internal enemy. There's a, what we call the flesh, our internal desires, the thoughts and the inclinations of our heart and the thoughts of our mind and the natural course, the direction that we would naturally take. We are fallen human beings. We have fallen minds and hearts. Our wills, even our very bodies are experiencing the reality of the fall. We are now mortal. We were created for immortality. Sin brings death and sin brings decay. So you have the internal enemy of the flesh. There's also an external or two external enemies, actually. There's

the world, the world that did not know, the world that does not realize, the world that does not welcome, the world that is not interested, the world, this world system in which we live that is moving in a completely different direction. You see, there is a current that is moving people in a direction and it is not towards God. It's away from God. When I go swimming in the Atlantic Ocean in New Jersey, the place that we go swimming is known for having a strong, what we call, undertow. So you might go in at Fifth Street and if you're in for quite a while, you'll come out at Seventh. You don't realize it, but the current is just moving you along. A little bit north, sometimes it moves you south. But the idea is it's imperceptible. And the world is that enemy which sometimes is very perceptible, but oftentimes it's quite subtle. But you just follow the flow. Go with the flow. The current just moves you in a direction, but it never moves you towards God. It always moves you away from God. And then there's an outright enemy, the evil one. Jesus summarizes the ministry of the evil one, if you wish to describe it in that way. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, John 10. That's what he comes to do. He doesn't tell the truth. He lies. He doesn't come to give. He takes. He doesn't come to bring life. He comes to bring death. He doesn't build up. He wants to tear down. The thief comes only to steal, to kill, and destroy. Jesus said, I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly. So when we see this word victory, we are now on the battlefield, and you and I are arrayed against these three terrible enemies. The flesh, the internal enemy, the world, which surrounds us in all different ways, and the evil one who wants to kill, steal, and destroy. And we can rightly conclude that we are up against it. We are out of our depth. We are overwhelmed. And we are inevitably going to be defeated. And that, of course, is true. Unless, unless there is one who intervenes. Unless there is one who fights the battle on our behalf. Unless there is one who is stronger than the flesh, and who is greater than the world, and who has higher authority and power than the evil one. If such is the case, the flow of the battle begins to shift in the other direction. So as you read the New Testament particularly, your ears should be attentive to these key words. Remember when John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Now he wasn't identifying Jesus as a juvenile sheep. He was identifying Jesus as a sacrifice. He was using temple sacrificial language. The Lamb of God, the sacrifice that will secure the salvation, not of a few, but of a vast multitude that no one can count. And when the Apostle Paul uses this great term victory, death, death, where is your victory? You seem to have a hundred percent success rate, and yet that victory has now been overcome.

Grave, where is your victory? And it seems that the tables have now been turned. The sting of death, sin, the power of sin is the law. Well, we have a Savior who kept the law perfectly. We have a Savior who is now taking the sting out of death because he took the sting upon himself. And we have a victory that is now shared. But thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the 5th of June 1944, the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, he issued what was known as an order of the day. He addressed this to every soldier, sailor, and airman of the Allied forces. Eisenhower was at the top of a very big pyramid. He was a supreme commander.

[22 : 18] It was dated the 5th of June because the initial D-Day landings were planned to be the 5th. The weather was poor. They were delayed a day. And D-Day, as we know, happened on the 6th of June 1944. Let me just read, it's a short order of the day, but let me just read what he wrote. You are about to embark upon the great crusade, towards which we have striven many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hope and prayers of liberally loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave allies and brothers in arms on other fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world. Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well-trained, well-equipped, and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely. But this is the year 1944. Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940 to 41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our home fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned. The free men of the world are marching together to victory. I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory. Good luck, and let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking. This is often used as an

illustration of motivational writing, of a way in which the general in charge of the army, the navy, and the air force is marshaling his forces and preparing them for great battle. And it just seems so exciting and so enthusing. And of course we know how the battle ended. That the D-Day landings were successful and it was the beginning of the end for the German Empire on the continent of Europe. But what was less well known is that Eisenhower wrote a second dispatch on the 5th of June 1944. That dispatch was much shorter, and the tone of that dispatch was much different. Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold, and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the air, and the navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone." You see, the 5th of June, the 6th of

June, no one knew the outcome. The desire was victory, the hope was victory, the goal was victory, but the outcome was not known. Unlike Jesus. Jesus had a clear goal, Jesus had a clear destination, but Jesus had a guaranteed victory. It's a guaranteed victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. A guaranteed victory over death and sin and evil. So it's not just a motivational speech. The Apostle Paul is not just trying to encourage a group of disparate and discourage Christians. He is reminding them of a fact, an unalterable fact of history that was predicted, that was confirmed, and that is now guaranteed.

That we have a Savior Jesus who is victorious over all enemies. He is victorious over death, he is victorious over evil, he is victorious over sin. And that's why the palm branches were thrown in expectation.

Now you see, this is an example where the crowd did more than they realized. The crowd said more than they understood. They praised the triumphant king on the Sunday of Palm Sunday. Five days hence, many of their voices would have been united in a much different chorus. Remember when they said, crucify, crucify. What shall I do with your king? Will I crucify your king? What about, who shall I release to you? Away with this man? Give us Barabbas. A much different cry just five days later. So the cries of Hosanna and the palm branches were done accurately. Jesus was described accurately. The palm branches signified a coming victory, but many in the crowd would not have appreciated what was going on.

They had certain expectations that Jesus didn't meet. But we now know. And when the Apostle Paul says, thanks be to God, he gives us. That's a remarkable combination. He, the subject, Jesus, gives, the verb, us. We are the recipients. We are the receivers of the victory. And that's why in Revelation chapter 7, everyone's wearing the same clothes. Their robes are white. Why they've been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

[27 : 39] No longer any sin. No longer any guilt. No longer any shame. No smudge. No stain. White robes. And they're holding in their hands a palm branch. They are now numbered as the victorious.

I think we need to be reminded. This is not a motivational speech. This is not a chance to rally the troops on the dawn of a day of great battle. But the Apostle Paul is reminding his audience, and I am trying to remind myself and you, that we are victorious in Jesus. He alone is victorious, and he shares his victory with us. We might often feel the exact opposite. Not victorious, but defeated. Not feeling a sense of success, but a feeling, a sense of being vanquished, disheartened, discouraged. You see, good theology should be accompanied with heart and with head and with heart and with will.

You see, if we know the facts, that should shape how we feel. If we know the facts, that should shape what we desire.

Because we know not just that we are on the side that one day might possibly somehow, some way win. We are on the side that has won. And the victory one day will be demonstrated to all.

[29 : 08] The victory that is won by one Jesus Christ is shared now with all of his people. Well, what do we do? What do we do in light of this knowledge? What do we do in light of this truth?

Well, the Apostle Paul is no mean preacher. He doesn't give you any hesitation. There's no question mark as to what he wants you to do with what you have just learned. If Jesus is victorious, and he is. If Jesus has defeated death, and he did. If Jesus has overcome evil and sin, which he has done.

Verse 58. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Stand firm. Stand firm. Hold your ground.

You're on the winning side. You are representing Jesus who is victorious. Stand firm. Stand firm. Let nothing move you. The first part of this verse looks quite static. Stand firm. Let nothing move you. As if something or someone is trying to move you, and you're standing your ground. That's quite static. But notice that the static image gives way to an active image.

[30 : 20] Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. How do you stand firm? How do you remain immovable?

The best way of standing firm, and the best way of remaining immovable, is abounding in his work. Is abounding in his service. You see, when we abound in his work, that's when we stand firm in the faith.

When we abound in his service, that's how we do not lose heart, or that's how we do not lose our place. Why? Why? Because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Much of our labor seems to be vain and pointless. Much of our efforts, much of the words that we speak, and if we're honest, oftentimes we feel much many of the prayers that we pray appear to be without effect.

We are simply told here that that is not possible. When we invoke the name of the Lord, when we serve him, when we speak on his behalf, when we implore him in prayer, all of these fall under the category of labor in the Lord.

[31 : 35] We are guaranteed by God, who cannot lie, that whatever we do in his name, whatever we do in his cause, whatever we do in his service, that prayer, that service, that speaking will never be of no effect.

He will always do something. We might not see it. We might not perceive it. It might not happen now. It might not happen tomorrow. It might not happen in our lifetime.

But when you speak on behalf of Jesus, something's going to happen. When you serve on behalf of Jesus, something is going to happen. When you represent him wherever you are called, something will happen.

Something will happen externally and something will happen internally. That's the best way of standing firm. That's the best way of being immovable, is being active in his service.

You see, Jesus' labor was never in vain. The words that he spoke, never empty. The miracles he performed, never without effect. The sermons that he preached, the parables that he told.

[32 : 42] The life that he lived, the death that he died. The resurrection that he experienced, never without effect. And when we are united to him, the same now is true. Just as the palm branches are transferred to each one of us because we are victorious, we are no longer doing, saying, or serving in a way that is empty or fruitless.

We are guaranteed that when we are in him, we are victorious. And when we are in him, our labor will never be without effect.

That's what the Christians in Corinth needed to hear 2,000 years ago. That's what I need to hear tonight. I think that's what we need to hear tonight.

That we have a victorious savior. He shares his victory with us. And he accompanies us in all that we do, in all that we speak. And he says, when you serve in his name, that service will always bring an effect of some sort.

We trust him to be faithful, and we trust his word to be true. He has not yet let us down, and he has not yet acted contrary to his own word.

[33 : 55] He is faithful. Let's pray.