

# O Death, Where is Your Victory

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- [ 0 : 00 ]     He is risen. Jesus the Nazarene, son of the Virgin Mary, is risen. The carpenter who brings the kingdom of God into the world is risen.
- Friend of sinners is risen. Healer of broken bodies and troubled minds is risen. The master who lays down his life in excruciating pain on the cross is risen.
- Oh, death, where is your victory? If you have ever stood at the grave of a loved one or a dear friend who has died, and many of you have, you know how gut-wrenching it is.
- Like what that Syrian man we see on the television news experienced, kneeling over that mound of dirt where he had buried his wife and children.
- The grief surges from deep within your soul, and the tears, as much as you try to keep them inside, well up and sometimes flow in rivers of sorrow.
- [ 1 : 12 ]     During the seven decades I have lived in this world marked by death, and especially over the years that I have served as a pastor, I have led hundreds of graveside services.
- I've stood with hundreds of families as they watched their loved ones' bodies being lowered into the ground. Some who died I barely knew. Some I knew very well.
- In either case, it was a gut-wrenching experience. The most recent time was standing at the graveside of my mother, the day we buried her last summer.
- Much of her family was gathered around her casket, which was perched just alongside the hole into which we would lay her. In an hour or so, I would be speaking for her formal memorial service.
- I'd be working from the 11th chapter of John, the story of Jesus coming to the graveside of his good friend Lazarus. The story in which, before he goes to the cross, Jesus says, Whoever believes in me will live, even if they die.
- [ 2 : 25 ]     And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. So, I did not want to read that text over my mother's grave. But what text would bring the most comfort to her family, to her sons and daughter-in-laws and grandchildren and me?
- As I stood there, surrounded by grieving faces, looking into the hole where a few years before we had laid my father's body, all I could do, to think to do, was to read the 15th chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the disciples of Jesus living in the first century city of Corinth.
- And so I did. The whole chapter. Over that place of death. Line by line. Slowly. Chokingly.
- Line by line. It was a powerful experience. Life seemed to surge from the ground, seemingly engulfing us all.
- I can feel, even now, the life that seemed to swallow me and my family. As line by line, I kept reading. Until, with tears streaming down my face, I read.
- [ 3 : 44 ]     Oh, death. Where is your victory? You can understand, then, why on this Easter morning I would like to read the whole chapter over you.

You can understand why on this Easter morning I want to read the whole chapter over the whole world. But I will not. I will instead read what I think are the really crucial lines that we need to hear on this particular Easter Sunday.

I would encourage you to read the whole chapter later today. Perhaps even at the graveside of your loved one or over the place where you have spread their ashes.

Will you please stand now for the reading of God's Word? God's Word to a world seemingly under death.

I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received. That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

[ 4 : 54 ]     That He was buried. And that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. And that He appeared to Cephas, to Peter, and to the Twelve.

After that, He appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. That's a euphemism for die.

And He appeared to James, and then to all the apostles. And last of all, as if it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. I am the least of the apostles.

I am not fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But now, Christ has been raised from the dead.

The firstfruits of those who fall asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

[ 5 : 53 ]     But each in their own order. Christ the firstfruits. After that, those who are Christ at His coming. And then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father.

When He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

Now I say this, brothers and sisters, that 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 be changed 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 will be changed.

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

[ 7 : 00 ]     O death, where is your victory? 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 and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

This is the word of God. You may be seated. Living God, we believe that you got a hold of Saul of Tarsus, and you made him into the Apostle Paul.

And we believe that you taught him these great thoughts, this great insight, and that you enabled him to write down these words for us. And now I pray in your mercy and grace that you will bring us all the way into the reality of which these words speak, as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. But now, Christ has been raised from the dead.

[ 8 : 15 ]     Verse 20. But now, Christ has been raised from the dead. Raised never again to die.

That is the way, that is the point of the way the original language works in this text. First century Greek had this capacity to be quite precise. The grammar of 1 Corinthians 15 is quite precise.

The Apostle Paul is saying that Christ is raised not in just one moment in time. That would be the point of using a particular tense of the verb.

He is saying Christ is raised and is still raised in all moments of time. And that is the point of the particular tense he used.

Raised and never to die again. During his earthly ministry, Jesus rescued a number of people from the grip of death.

[ 9 : 17 ] A 12-year-old girl who had just died within the hour before Jesus arrived at her home. A young man, the son of a widow from the village of Nain, who had died earlier in the day and whose body was being taken to the cemetery.

And Lazarus, his good friend from the village of Bethany, whose body had been in the tomb four days by the time Jesus got there. In each case, Jesus called them back to life.

But each one of them, one day, died again. The young girl grew up, maybe married, maybe had children, maybe had grandchildren.

But one day, she died again and they buried her. The young man, the widow's son, maybe lived for many more years. Maybe he had a successful business.

I like to think he became a lawyer who specialized in widow's rights. But one day, he too died again and was buried. Lazarus.

[ 10 : 21 ] I wish we knew more about Lazarus. I mean, he must have had a significant ministry. I would think that he had many opportunities to share his experience of being called out of the tomb.

I would think that he shared it with a local rotary club. Or maybe the first century equivalent of CNN or CBC aired a special Sabbath night presentation out of the tomb.

One man's return from the grave. But Lazarus also, one day, died again and was again placed in the tomb.

Jesus was raised and still is never to die again. For you see, Jesus did not come back to life.

That is not the good news of Easter morning. Jesus did not come back to life. Jesus is not saved from death. He was resurrected, which is a very different thing.

[ 11 : 24 ] Jesus went into death. Down into death. Down, down, down. All the way down and through.

Through death. Not back from the grave, but through the grave. And in the process, defanging the grave.

In the process, undoing death. And emerging on the other side of the grave in a whole new order of existence. An order of existence in which no one had ever existed.

Not brought back to life, as good as that would be. But resurrected to life. Never to die again. Not possible to die again.

Death can do no more to him. Oh, death. Where is your victory? And because he is alive, never to die again.

[ 12 : 24 ] He can be for us and for the world. All that he claims to be. Before he's crucified and buried. Because he's alive, never to die again. We know that he was not crazy.

When he made all of those claims that he made. He was not being some egocentric narcissist. He is the light of the world. He is the bread of life.

He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He is the true vine into which he aggrasps us. He is the way. He is the truth. He is the life.

He is the resurrection. The resurrection. He himself is the resurrection. Whatever is meant by resurrection from the dead. He is it.

And because he is alive, never to die again. He can now fulfill all those promises he made before he was crucified and buried. Like, whoever believes in him who sent me has eternal life.

[ 13 : 24 ] Now, before dying, has eternal life. And does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Now, before dying, has passed out of death into life. Because the promiser is alive, never to die again, he can now fulfill all those promises.

And the one I already mentioned, whoever believes in me shall live even if they die. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Because he is alive, he can make all of this happen.

Jesus of Nazareth is the first person in history to be resurrected. Those he raised, he resuscitated.

He is resurrected. The first person to be resurrected. Oh, death, where is your victory? And here's what the Apostle Paul is emphasizing in 1 Corinthians 15.

[ 14 : 26 ] The risen Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, is not just a solitary man. He is the man. He is the new man.

He is the new man in whom the Creator is starting all over again. The first man, Adam and his wife Eve, were created in the image of God.

They were created to reflect the nature and character of the glorious God. They were created to enjoy this intimate friendship with a holy God. But sadly, they chose to strike out on their own.

They chose to try to be human apart from God. Human apart from God, which is impossible. As we are witnessing all over the world today.

The Creator created creatures to be creatures who cling to the Creator. For life and wisdom and power and joy. The first Adam bought the lie.

[ 15 : 27 ] Bought the illusion that we can make it on our own. The first Adam disobeys the will of the Creator. And death enters the world. And the garden becomes a cemetery.

But the Gospel is, the Creator will not be frustrated. The Creator will not give up on His grand plan. So, He starts over again.

With a new human. Jesus the Nazarene. The new Adam. Jesus lives human life the way the first Adam was supposed to live it.

In radical dependence on God. And in the process, undoes the ruin that the first Adam wrought. And glory be to His name. He undoes the death the first Adam caused.

Jesus the new Adam enters Adam's ruin. Going all the way to the place that Adam's ruin will lead. All the way into the grave. And at the place where the first Adam ends.

[ 16 : 28 ] The new Adam. The last Adam. Starts over. By dying Adam's death. Jesus undoes Adam's death. Oh, the words need to be trumpeted across the globe today.

Verses 21 and 22. In Adam all die. But in Christ shall all be made alive. Since by a man came the death. So by a man came the resurrection of the dead.

And now, all who joined this new Adam. All who enter into relationship with him. Began to participate in the new Adam's history.

In his legacy. In place of the first Adam's disobedience. We now get to live the new Adam's obedience. In place of the first Adam's disintegration.

We now get to live the new Adam's integration. In place of the first Adam's decay. We get to live the new Adam's vibrancy. In place of the first Adam's death.

[ 17 : 29 ] We get to live the new Adam's life. We get to live the new Adam's resurrected life. Oh, death. Where is your victory? And here's what the Apostle Paul is emphasizing about this new Adam.

As the new Adam, he is the first fruits. Verse 20 again. The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. The first fruits of this coming great resurrection.

Jesus is the first to experience resurrection. But as the first, he is the guarantee of this massive crop that's going to follow. That is, the risen Jesus is what we in him are going to become.

This is what Paul wants us to grasp. The risen living Jesus, never to die, is what we in relationship with him will become. And what we are going to become includes his resurrected body.

Imagine that. His resurrected body. But of course, in the first century, the word resurrection meant bodily life.

[ 18 : 50 ] You've heard the name N.T. Wright. Probably the leading Christian thinker in our time. Dr. Wright has recovered for the church so many dimensions of the gospel. But especially that resurrection means bodily life.

And so, Fleming Rettledge, one of my favorite preachers, observes that when the angel at the tomb says to the women, when he is risen, they knew he did not mean what so many people take the angel to mean.

Jesus' soul went to heaven. That's not what the angel said. I mean, what good would that do for the world? How would that speak to the world's condition?

The women knew the angel was not saying what so many take him to say. Jesus' cause goes on. Jesus is dead, but Jesus' cause goes on. How would that have spoken to the human condition?

He is risen. In the first century, it could only mean he is alive in bodily form. And when we join him in his resurrected life, we are resurrected into the new man's resurrected body.

[ 20 : 01 ] Oh, what a day that will be. A body like the Creator gave Adam and Eve in the beginning, but no longer ruined by the sin that they committed.

Indeed, it will be more glorious than that body. As Paul says to the Philippians, we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of this humble state into conformity with the body of his glory.

Oh, a body that does not decay. Imagine. A body that does not get sick cannot get sick.

And a body that does not die cannot die. Oh, death, where is your victory? And one more thing Paul is emphasizing in 1 Corinthians 15.

The risen Jesus, who is never to die again, the new Adam, the firstfruits, now reigns. Verse 25. He now reigns over all.

[ 21 : 07 ] But, of course, I mean, who else can reign? Who else has overcome the great enemy? Only Jesus has.

Only Jesus has overcome death. He has the keys. Only he has the keys. He is the only candidate in all the universe to reign over the world. I know we do not always see this fact of the universe.

But because of what happened on Easter morning, we know it is true. If the Easter gospel is true, so also is the gospel of the reign of the resurrected Jesus.

Along with many of you, I've been praying for the people of the Coptic Church of Egypt. Especially for the leadership as they seek to serve their traumatized congregations. The Coptic liturgy centers on the phrase, he must reign.

Oh, I wish they were meeting this morning in the churches to do the liturgy again. He must reign. Jesus reigns. Somehow he reigns. Hang on to the one who reigns.

[ 22 : 16 ] He's defeated all the enemies of life. Not abolished them. Not yet. But defeated them. He's stolen their authority. They do not have the authority they once had in the fabric of the universe.

Jesus has the authority. And he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet. Sin. Defeated. One day totally abolished.

Flesh. Defeated. But one day totally abolished. The evil one. Defeated. One day totally abolished. And death. Defeated. Defeated. At the cross. One day totally abolished. When all things are subjected to him, says Paul.

Which is to say that Easter is not the end of the story. Easter is a great climax in the story, but it's not the end. Which is why you have to come back next Sunday.

He who is resurrected and exalted to the throne will come again. And when he comes, all, all, all that seeks to rob humanity of life with God will be abolished.

[ 23 : 23 ] Especially the last enemy. Especially death. Oh, death. Where is your victory? Sorry. So, what does it all mean for us today?

What does it mean standing at the gravesite of a loved one? It means we do not need to be afraid anymore. The greatest fear in life is the fear of death.

Am I right? The fear of the unknown. The fear of loss of control. The fear of total darkness. The fear of non-being.

And that fear keeps us from living to the fullest the life Jesus Christ calls us to right now. The writer of Hebrews says that evil has kept humanity in slavery all of our lives because of the fear of death.

The risen Jesus has stolen the enemy's chief weapon. In relationship with him, he has taken away the fear of death. One of my spiritual heroes is a man named Dallas Willard.

[ 24 : 35 ] You may have heard his name before. I think he belongs right up there with names like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther and John Calvin and Carl Barton, C.S. Lewis and Thomas Torrance.

As a disciple of Jesus, he served as professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. And he's written a number of books that are having tremendous impact on 21st century understanding of Christianity.

I've learned so much from this man. But the biggest thing I've learned is that we no longer need to live by fear. Because Jesus has overcome death, there is nothing, absolutely nothing to fear anymore.

Dallas recently died. Passed through to the other side. And one of his students, a man named Gary Black, who had the opportunity of living with Dallas the last year of his life on earth.

Gary Black writes this in honor of Dallas. I don't know that I can adequately or completely communicate how fearlessly Dallas faced his own mortality.

[ 25 : 39 ] Even when the pain and suffering he experienced, some of which was considerable. It wasn't that he was putting up a front or trying to be strong for his family, which many people do when facing hardships. And it is often an admirable and loving act of grace.

But Dallas was different. It wasn't that he was suppressing his fear or managing his fear. It was that fear wasn't in him. Therefore, it wasn't a struggle to be brave.

He simply and easily faced the facts of his life and death without the presence of fear. And then he writes this. I can't imagine an easier yoke to walk with during my final days than one completely absent of fear.

That's how I want to live the rest of my life. Because he who was crucified is alive never to die again, we in relationship with him have no reason to be afraid anymore.

Furthermore, what Paul announces in 1 Corinthians 15 means that those who have died have not died. Yes, their hearts stopped beating and the lungs stopped breathing, but they did not die.

[ 26 : 55 ] They have entered into a deeper, richer relationship with the resurrection and the life. You see, when anyone in Christ passes away, they do not meet death.

They meet Christ. You've heard of people saying, death came for the loved one. Not if you are in Christ. Death does not come for us.

Christ comes for us. We do not meet death. We meet Christ who overcame death. When my heart stops beating, the next thing I know is Christ, not death.

I know the resurrection himself. And one day, how long until that day, we do not know. But we do know this, that every Easter Sunday means we're that much closer.

One day, those who died will, along with us who die, be caught up in the final resurrection. Mortality will put on immortality.

[ 27 : 53 ] The perishable will put on the imperishable. In the meantime, those who die in Christ do not die when they die.

They are aware of Christ. And I think they are aware that they are not yet in the mode of existence in which they and we one day will live. They are at peace because they're in the relationship with one who is called to peace.

They are at rest because they're in the relationship with the one who is our rest. They are alive because they're in a relationship with the one who is alive. But they are longing for that final resurrection.

For what the African-American brothers and sisters call the great getting up day. When all of us who have been resurrected in Jesus Christ receive our resurrection bodies.

When all of us enter into the new heaven and new earth of which Jesus is the first fruits. All of this means that we need to modify the kinds of things we say at memorial services.

[ 28 : 55 ] I've probably done 400 of them, so I know about memorial services. Like what was said at the service for my youngest brother who passed away a month ago. It was a lovely service in every way.

His sons and daughter spoke of their dad now being free from all the suffering he had endured in the last 10 years of his life. It was awful. And they're right.

They spoke of their dad now being free of all the inner turmoil that had haunted him all of his life. And they're right. And they spoke of their dad playing golf right now.

On one of the finest golf courses in the universe. And playing like he'd never played on earth. Well, not exactly.

Right instinct. Because we are destined for such an earthly future. But not yet. Not until Jesus puts all his enemies under his feet. And we are brought into the new world he is making.

[ 29 : 57 ] Not until he has totally abolished death and delivered the kingdom to his father. And another modification we need to make. In what we say at memorial services.

Our loved ones now are taken by the resurrected one. Our loved ones now are preoccupied with the one who gives them life.

What matters to them more than anything else now is knowing and loving Jesus. Nothing else holds a candle to Jesus to them now.

About a year and a half ago, I was driving the car with our oldest daughter's son sitting in the back seat. At the time, he was six years old. We had just finished one of our favorite activities.

Skipping rocks down at the water at Jericho Beach. And we were on our way to get ice cream. We were traveling east on 4th Avenue heading towards Canby Street. Grandpa?

[ 30 : 56 ] Yes? People die, right? Not knowing where this question was coming from, I said, yes they do. Grandpa?

Yes? Especially old people, right? Yes, that is right. Grandpa? Yes?

Yes? You are old, right? Well, sort of. I feel 32 or 35 inside. But yes, you could say I'm old.

Grandpa? Yes? So you're going to die soon, right? Well, I do not think so. I'm feeling pretty well these days, especially after skipping rocks with you.

But yes, I'm going to die someday. Grandpa? Yes? Yes? And that will be okay. Why do you say that?

[ 31 : 55 ] Because you're going to a better place. That is right. And you will see your dad and your son. I did not even know he knew that our son Alex had died.

That is right. I will see them again. Grandpa? Yes? Yes? How much longer till we get to the ice cream store? He's brought up the subject of death a number of times since.

Most recently, a month ago, he asked if I will be there when he graduates from high school in 10 years. I told him, I hope so. I told him, I hope so.

But that is not in my control. So I'm imagining one day having a follow-up conversation. Somewhere down the road, after I or someone teaches them how to read the Bible, he will have come to me to take me out to coffee.

We'll be in the car. This time, he'll be driving. I'll be sitting in the passenger seat. Grandpa? Yes? Sure is good to be with you.

[ 33 : 07 ] And thanks for the help with my tuition at university. You are most welcome. Grandpa? Yes? You're going to die soon, right?

Yes. I do hope to finish another book, though. Grandpa? Grandpa? Yes? When you die, you will be okay. You told me that when you were six years old.

Why do you say it now? Well, I've been reading 1 Corinthians 15. What an amazing text. I wish my professors would read it. Indeed.

Grandpa, when you die, you will come face to face with the one you have loved and served all your life. Oh, yes. And Grandpa? Grandpa? When you see his face, you will, along with all the redeemed cosmos, cry out, Oh, death, where is your victory?

Christ is risen. Jesus, you are alive. Never to die again.

[ 34 : 18 ] And looking into your face, we realize there is no reason to be afraid anymore. I wish I did. Amen.

Also, what do you think is a miracle. I need to wait.