

Mystery and Victory

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[0 : 00] It is regrettable that over the centuries, we in the Scottish church haven't emphasized the mystery of what we believe. We deal in logical systems and doctrinal statements.

We want to categorize everything and put it in a box, neatly tied with a theological bow. But the older I get as a Christian, the more I realize just how much I do not know and cannot know about God. The very idea of God is mysterious and can only be understood in terms of what He has chosen to reveal of Himself to us. He cannot be seen. He cannot be heard. He cannot be calculated or measured. He cannot be fully understood. He defies all attempts to define Him, except as He chooses to divine Himself to us. Our faith is rational, but that's not to say it's not deeply mysterious. The resurrection body is one such mystery of what we can know only as much as God Himself has told us. What shall we look like? What shall we be able to do?

Even the means by which we shall be raised is mysterious and beyond our limited understanding. When confronted by such mystery, the best response isn't to grumble at how little God has chosen to show us, but to kneel before Him in worship, marveled in praise and filled with hope of the glorious prospect which lies before us. Well, in our passage this evening, the Apostle Paul is concluding his arguments concerning Christian resurrection. All the way through the chapter, he's been arguing against those in the church in Corinth who denied the possibility that Christians, having died, will be physically raised to new life. Now, in these last verses, like a child with a new toy, he explodes with enthusiasm.

One gets the impression that, astonished at the sheer majesty of the prospect of future resurrection, he can't contain himself. His words, inspired by the Spirit, shoot from the hip, and yet they're such beautiful words to describe such a beautiful thing. This, my Christian brothers and sisters, is what lies before us. Our passage neatly divides into three sections. First, the change from verse 50 through 54a, then the victory from verse 54b to 57, and then the command in verse 58.

Well, tonight, elevated by this mystery of our future state, let's resolve that in the here and now of daily life, we're going to be steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.

[3 : 14] First of all, then, from verse 50, the beginning of verse 54, we have the change, the change. The key word in this section is change. It's used in both verse 51 and 52. We shall all be changed. We shall be changed. We shall become something which at present we are not. Literally, we shall become other than we are. A time is coming when every Christian, dead or alive, shall be changed. Paul says, behold, I tell you a mystery. When Paul uses that word, behold, he's not just telling us to look closely at what we see, but to look beyond what we can see. Things are not what one day they shall be. Our frail weakness shall be replaced by imperishable immortality. And in this section, he says at least three things about this change. It's necessity, it's suddenness, and it's glory. The older we get as Christians, the weaker our bodies become, the more we long for this change. But come it most definitely will for us all. And in these cardinal promises of God, we place our hope. So, we have first of all here the necessity of the change, the necessity. In verse 50, we're told that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. In verse 53, we're told that this perishable body must put on imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. These changes, it would seem, are necessary for life and existence in the kingdom of God. Our present bodies are not suited for existence in such an environment. They are flesh and blood, a reference not so much to that which is material over that which is spiritual, but a reference to flesh and blood as stained by sin.

Such polluted flesh and blood cannot coexist with the perfection of God's holiness. Our bodies are perishable, and once again, our perishable bodies cannot exist in an eternal universe.

Our mortal bodies are not suited to the aid of immortality in the kingdom of God, and we say, but this is a mystery. Well, it must be a mystery. What will the new heavens and the new earth look

like? Nothing we've ever seen here before. We'll need new eyes to see the colors, new ears to hear the sounds, new bodies to walk the golden streets. We might have glimpses here and now, but glimpses are all they are. For the reality, we're going to need new glorified bodies.

None of us are conditioned to live on the planet Mars. If we wanted to live on Mars, without space suits and space stations or whatever else, our bodies would need to be significantly different from what they are now. We need to be able to cope with temperatures down to minus 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

We need to be able to extract the oxygen from an atmosphere which is made up of 95% carbon dioxide and only 1% oxygen, and our bodies would need to adapt to having only one third of the gravity we have here on Earth. If we needed to live on Mars, our bodies would need to change.

[7 : 08] And in the same way, Paul seems to be saying, to live in the kingdom of God, in the new heavens and the new earth, our bodies need to change. The perishable replaced by the imperishable, the stained by the pure, and the mortal by the immortal. It is so mysterious what we shall look like and what our appearance shall be. We cannot even imagine it. But what we know is that there shall not even be a trace of death, of sin, of decay or weakness in the kingdom of God. Nothing we hate and fear. We shall be as fresh and as strong after one million years there as we are on day one.

Secondly here, we have the suddenness of the change. The suddenness of the change. Now, we see change everywhere. New housing estates are springing up all over our city, both in the outskirts and on the brownfields. The face of Glasgow is gradually changing. Even in the 20 or so years since I've lived here, the east end of our city has gone from being run down to being the new west end.

But it's taken many years and it'll take many years more. By contrast, the change in our body so that all our frailty, weakness and sin is replaced by immortality, glory and purity will be instantaneous.

In verse 52, Paul says of it, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, in the smallest, literally, in the smallest atom of time, in the blinking of an eye, in the time it takes for a trumpet to sound. That's how quickly we shall be changed. It shall not be a process of evolution. It shall be a point. It may be that the process of our dying took many years as we progressively weakened. But the change to glory shall be immediate. There shall be no process. It shall take as long as it takes to click my fingers.

And again, it's so mysterious, isn't it? We can't quite imagine what it's going to be like. But when Christ comes for us, those of us who are still alive will be instantly changed.

[9 : 34] One moment we shall be in these frail, weak and sinful bodies. The next we shall be changed into our immortal, glorious and pure bodies, bodies fit for life in the new heavens and the new earth.

Look at these fingers of ours, these hands. As we age, our fingers can't do what they once used to be able to. And our hands are more wrinkled. But in the blink of an eye, what shall they become? Glorious fingers, reaching out to God. Strong hands forever offering praise to God. It shall happen in an atom of time, so sudden.

And then thirdly, we have the glory of this change. The glory of this change. Because it shall be a glorious change. We shall go from being perishable to imperishable, mortal to immortal, darkness to light. What precisely we shall look like, we do not know.

But what we do know is that we shall be more glorious in appearance than even the angels. Our appearance more impressive than that of Gabriel or the archangels. What a contrast it shall be to the way we are here and now.

[10 : 56] By virtue of my calling as your minister, it's my privilege often to be with those who are in the last days of their lives. Those whose minds have been broken by dementia. Those whose bodies have been broken by cancer. And it's hard enough for me to be with them.

Let alone their families who have cared for them with such affection and with such love. It's hardest then to imagine that this person that we love, slipping away before our very eyes, consumed by weakness and mortality, will one day rise imperishable and immortal.

Their glory exceeding that of the mightiest angel. It's so mysterious. But it's the sure hope that sustains us through the trials of life and death.

What shall our loved ones look like in their future state? What shall they be able to do? I don't pretend to know these things other than saying that in the later words of the Apostle John, they

shall look like their glorious Lord Jesus Christ. When the angels look upon them, they shall gasp and say to one another, He looks like our master Jesus. She looks like the King we worship. And if Christ himself was not in heaven at the Father's right hand, they would worship us instead. Such shall be the glory of our new bodies.

You know, sometimes when confronted by the mysterious glory of such a future, the best thing we can do is to just sit quietly, gently smile, and meditate on how the next time that we see those who we have loved and lost in the Lord, all for sure will recognize them.

[12 : 50] But they'll be so very different from the last time we saw them. Our last memories of them will be overwhelmed by the sheer glory of what they are now.

Such a necessary change, such a sudden change, such a glorious change, such a mysterious change, such a beautiful change. Behold, Paul says, do not just look closely at what you can see, but look beyond what you can see. Look beyond the horizons of your imaginations and settle for the mystery of the beauty of the promise of God. We shall all be changed.

Secondly, from verse 54, the second part of verse 54 to 57, we have the victory. The victory. Death may be an enemy, but through Jesus Christ, it's a defeated enemy.

We sing mournful laments over death and we fear it greatly. And yet how great the difference Christ makes in us. For in Him we can sing, death is swallowed up in victory. Oh, death, what is your victory? Oh, death, what is your sting? The death of a Christian, of course, while a matter of grief for those of us who remain, is for them a victory. For death is no longer an enemy for them, but a servant ushering them into the closer presence of God Himself, where there are no more tears, no more sin, no more death, but joy unspeakable and eternal life with the Father.

But how shall this be? How shall this great victory of death over death be ours? It is, as Paul says in verse 57, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through our Lord Jesus Christ. It's because of His victory over death that we, who are joined to Him by faith, have victory over death. This goes back to the earlier passages in 1 Corinthians 15, where in verse 23, Paul argues that Jesus was raised on the third day as the firstfruits, and then we who belong to Him. The assurance of our victory over death is historically centered on an empty tomb outside a garden, in a garden outside the city walls of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, where Jesus, our Lord, rose from the grave. It is there death was swallowed up in victory. How do I know that my loved ones, when they die, shall be changed into the glorious image of Christ? How do I know this? It's because Christ Himself was raised 2,000 years ago.

[15 : 53] No wonder the angels rejoiced at the resurrection of Christ. No wonder their million voices joined together to exult in His victory over the grave. It's a wonder we in the church don't fixate more in the resurrection of our Lord, for His rising from the dead means that we are assured that we to one day will be changed into the image of the King of Kings. At the funeral of our loved ones, we need to remember the empty tomb of our Lord, for on that empty tomb is the sure and certain hope of our loved ones' resurrection into the beauty of imperishable immortality.

But earlier in verse 56, Paul introduces an even deeper reason. He writes, the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. The sting of death is the prospect that all sins committed against the law of God shall be judged and shall determine our eternal destiny. In Romans 6 verse 23, the apostle Paul writes, the wages of sin is death. When our sin against God remains undealt with, physical death is only the beginning of the worst of all our fears. When our transgressions remain outstanding before God, death has a sting way worse than any snake.

For Paul himself, he said in Philippians 1 verse 21, he said, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. For the Christians, for the Christian who sins against the law of God have been forgiven. Death is not an enemy. Death is a servant ushering us into the presence of our King. Sin and the law of punishment have no power over us. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, on the cross and by his resurrection, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands of the law. Having perfectly kept the law, he paid the penalty of the law that we had broken. He satisfied it completely and by his resurrection publicly declared that every sin committed by his people has been pardoned. Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Hallelujah. What a Savior. Jesus has drawn the sinful sting from the death of all those who have faith in him. Death ceases to be the last enemy and becomes our servant. Death loses its sting and we have the victory over the grave. We are not a defeated people. We are a people of victory in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are victorious not just because Christ was first to rise from the dead, but that he rose from the dead to publicly

demonstrate that his sacrifice for our sins was accepted and he has fully satisfied the just demands of the law on our behalf.

We may fear dying as Christians, but we need not fear death, for death is now the servant of God. In him we have the victory. When we stand at the graveside of a Christian we've loved, we do not pity them, for at this very moment they're enjoying the victorious life Jesus has earned for them. Rather, we're filled with the hope of our own resurrection into the mysterious beauty of this glorious immortality. The victory. Well then 30 and very briefly in verse 58, the command, the command.

[20 : 13] Well, to talk of mystery is one thing and an inspiring thing it is as well, but how does this help me tomorrow morning when I've got to get the packed lunches ready for the kids and I've got to give them a lift to school and then I've got to go to my own work? How does this help me with the spat I'm having with my husband or wife or with my friends? How does the mystery of the future state help me with washing the dishes and doing the ironing? Surely it fills our minds with hope and surely that hope places a spring on our step. Hope is the operative word. The hope of a glorious future which awaits us, a future which goes far beyond the capability of human language to describe. It's that hope which strengthens our wills, fills our hearts with joy and packs our minds with godly dreaming and imagination. Such hope, of course it transcends the ironing, but it fills the ironing with meaning. Such hope goes beyond the school run but gives us strength on exhausted days to get on and do it. In short, our mysteriously glorious future of resurrection and the pattern of Christ makes all the difference to us as Christians because without it there's no hope.

All we believe is empty and we are, as Paul says in verse 19, of all people to be most pitied. But Christ has risen and so shall we. And this gives us three very brief applications for daily life. First, be solid. Be solid. On the basis of all he said, Paul commands us saying, be steadfast, immovable. One of the chief problems the Corinthian Christians faced was that they seem to be so easily tricked by false teaching and false practice. On the basis of their sure and certain future in Christ, it's time for them to stop their instability and fasten themselves onto the central truths of the gospel. It's time to settle into their convictions and recognize how precious the gospel of Jesus Christ really is. It's a call to immovability and steadfastness of faith.

But it's also a call to be solid in practice. The world in which the Corinthians lived isn't very different from our world. It was filled with troubles and with temptations. There are times when we feel so exhausted that we may barely lift a finger in the service of the Lord. Our minds feel strained and our bodies feel weak. We're close to breaking point. But at that very moment, future glory fills our minds and hearts and the strength begins to return. On the basis of all that he said, Paul commands us, be steadfast, be immovable. Don't be flaky or shaky.

The Lord, if there was no physical resurrection and no future glory, we'd be just as well following in the footsteps of some in the church who said, let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die, back in verse 32.

It would be enough to abound in our own work and feather our own nests. But because of Christ, we no longer want to live for ourselves. We want to live for him. We want to abound in the work of Christ, not our work. Because we shall abound in the resurrection glory of our Lord when he comes, we want to abound in the work of our Lord now.

[24 : 17] One of my favorite commentators writes this beautiful paragraph about the word always, always. He writes, in youth and in age, in pleasant as well as in somber days, when many work with us and the work is a joy, and when we plod on alone with heavy hearts, when we have already done much, and when others have done scarcely anything, always. Whatever else may be said of us, may it be said that we did not live for ourselves, nor did we do it our own way, Mr. Sinatra, but we lived for our Lord, and we abounded in his work.

And then lastly, no, no. Back in verse 14, Paul writes, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.

If Christ is not raised, all we do in the service, all our believing, and all our Christian living is empty, it's worthless. What do we do? What do we gain by standing for Christ against a godless world? What does this man gain by working for the Christian Institute? Well, what did the martyrs of the early church die for? What did our covenanting forebears die for? Why should anyone inconvenience themselves to be known as a Christian? If Christ is not raised, then everything this man does is pointless, and everything our forefathers died for is worthless and empty. But we know that Christ has been raised, and that one day we shall be raised in mysterious glory to be with him and to be like him. We know it more surely than that yesterday was yesterday, today is today, and

tomorrow will be tomorrow. Nothing we do for Christ here and now is empty. All our labor for him, all our sweat and our tears, all our straining and our suffering, none of it's in vain. By saying not in vain, Paul is saying because our opposite, our costly labor for Christ will be wonderfully productive. Know it, be convinced of it, even as the doors of this world's favor. Even as the doors of this world's favor shut in your face and the trials of your faith trouble you. The joy of your faith and hope in Christ is infinitely greater greater than any labor in which you engage today.

You know, the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that verse 58 describes the attitude of Jesus throughout his life, and especially as he approached his passion and death. He was steadfast and immovable. He was always abounding in God's work, knowing that his labor in the Lord was not in vain.

[27 : 35] And why was that? Because his costly labor, far greater than ours, was to give himself as a sacrifice on the cross for our sins, but that after all his suffering, he would be raised to new and never-ending glorious life. As we read in Hebrews 12 verse 2, for the joy that was before him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of God.

Yes, for sure, our faith is full of mystery, the mystery of what we shall be one day in our future glorified, risen state. The mystery of how Jesus could be both God and man in one person. But greatest of all, I guess, the mystery of how God the Father, in his infinite holiness and eternal majesty, could love sinners like us. But he does. And all he says tonight is this, believe in the Son, love the Son, love the Son, follow my Son. And one day when he comes again, you shall be with him, and you shall look just like him.