

## **1 Corinthians 15: 50-58**

### ***Introduction***

Now I don't know how you spent that glorious day of sunshine yesterday, but I happened to be taking the wedding of a couple of friends in Suffolk. And the church was packed with friends and family and you can imagine the scene – there was this figure beautifully dressed in white gliding down the aisle, looking rather nervous actually, but then after I'd walked down the aisle came the bride.

But it was very hot and so after the service I changed out of my robes and into more conventional attire. And the funny thing was, chatting and meeting people after the service, some people didn't recognise me in a suit without my robes and dog collar on. After I'd changed they didn't realise I was the same person who took the service. Thankfully none of them said anything rude about the clergyman – they were just a bit embarrassed once the penny dropped.

Well now last week at the family service we were thinking about a change. Not just a change of clothes but a change of bodies. We've been working our way through 1 Corinthians 15 which is all about the resurrection – and it tells us that when we're raised to life, God will change us to be like Jesus. And we might not recognise ourselves – it'll still be us, but we might not recognise ourselves because we'll be given perfect bodies, bodies which have never been spoiled by sickness or sin or death, and which never will be. In other words bodies which are like Jesus resurrection body. God will change us to be like Jesus. And we're going to see that future fact has massive implications for our lives here and now. Once it sinks in that our bodies will be changed in the future, then that fact will change our lives in the present.

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But the question first is why – why is it necessary for us to be changed like that? And that's our first point this morning.

### **1. The Reason for the Change 50, 53**

And the reason is there in v50: **50 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.**

Now do you see his point - **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...** Now we just need to be careful here because when he uses those words - he's not saying that *physical* things can't enter the kingdom of God. That's been one of the main points of 1 Corinthians 15 – we are going to have physical bodies after death - we're going to have resurrection bodies just like Jesus has – real-life, physical, solid bodies. So he's not saying physical things can't inherit the kingdom of God. He's saying flesh and blood can't – which is Paul's way saying – look, you can't go to heaven as you are now! Your body as it is now just isn't fit for heaven. Or as he puts it in the second half of the verse, it's perishable.

And the point is this – our bodies now are spoiled - some more than others – and that's something that some of us are painfully, literally painfully, aware of. But then that's no different from the world we live in – it's spoiled world. In many ways it's a beautiful world, but it's also a spoiled world – spoiled in all the ways that fill the newspapers every day – spoiled by violence and greed and environmental problems and injustice and sickness and poverty. And when we read the papers and listen to the news and look at the world we say – it shouldn't be like this. And the answer of the Bible is – it won't be like this, not for ever. Because as v50 puts it – the kingdom of God is coming – this awful spoiled perishing world will be renewed and replace by a wonderful, perfect imperishable world.

And quite simply if we're going to live in the world as it was always intended to be, then we're also going to need bodies as they were always meant to be. Not bodies like the ones we've got now, not bodies which get spoiled by sickness and sin and death. But bodies which are perfect and incorruptible. And so Paul says in v53 **the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.**

I wonder if we ever just let the amazing truth of the world to come sink in. Maybe we don't think about it often enough – maybe that's why we often refer to it as the after life. In other this is where life happens, here and now – and then you die and you have an after life, because it won't really be a life at all. But the Bible's view is very different. When you die it's not an after life, it's life after death. It's going to be life like we've never lived it before, in world like we've never lived in before and so we'll need bodies like we've never had before.

That's the reason why we'll be changed to be like Jesus.

Point 1 – the reason for the change

Point 2...

### **... The Timing of that Change 51-52**

That's our second point because the question is when's it all going to happen? And there's a little bit more to the answer to that question than you might at first think. The basic answer is this: we'll get our new resurrection bodies when Jesus returns. Did you see that there at the end of v52: **the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.** It'll all happen when the trumpet sounds, when the dead get raised. But then if you think about it, that raises another question – what about those people who are still alive on earth when Jesus returns. How can they be raised from the dead if they haven't actually died yet? How will they be changed to be like Jesus?

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Well that's what Paul tells us now.

He says, v51, <sup>51</sup> Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – In other words when Christ returns, those who haven't died yet will get changed there and then – and it'll happen v52 <sup>52</sup> in a flash, just like that - in the twinkling of an eye.

Now we've mentioned it before but I think it's just worth thinking about again - what does Paul mean when he calls death 'sleep' – he does it there in v51 **We will not all sleep** – in other we will not all *die*. He calls it sleep because for the Christian dying is no more dangerous or final than someone nodding off. Which is why Christians were the first people to call their burial grounds – cemeteries. Because originally, literally the word cemetery means – dormitory, the place where people go to sleep.

And people sometimes ask what happens to us after we die? And we need to be careful with this idea of calling death sleep because to us sleep implies unconsciousness. When you're asleep you're not awake, you've no idea what's going on. And that is not what Paul is getting at. He's not saying that when someone dies then it's as if they become unconscious – as if they're asleep until Christ returns. The idea isn't like that.

He picks this image of sleep because when someone falls asleep in death, then the next thing that happens is that they wake up in the presence of Jesus. And I've just put some verses up there on the powerpoint –no need to look them up now but if you want to, just jot them down – they're just verses which show us that as soon as a Christian dies they go to be with Jesus. Do you remember that's what Jesus said to the thief on the cross – Today you will be with me in paradise. So we can be sure that when someone dies a Christian, we can be sure they've gone to be with Jesus. Oh now it's not they get a new resurrection body there and then. In fact in that 2 Corinthians verse up there Paul says that

when someone dies they are in some sense away from the body. But that's only temporary. Paul wants us to know that when the trumpet sounds – when Jesus returns – v52 **the dead** that is those who've fallen asleep, those who are away from their bodies, but consciously with Jesus, those people – the dead – they'll be **raised imperishable, and we will be changed** – in other words everyone – whether you died years ago, whether you're still alive when Jesus comes back – at that point, everyone will get given a changed, resurrection body.

Now so far all this has been about the future. About the resurrection. But we're used to the idea aren't we that things in the future affect the present.

- ⌚ Because it's pay day at the end of the month, well I'll keep going to work now.
- ⌚ Or because it's Dad's birthday next week, well I'd better buy a present this week.

Events in the future affect life in the present. Which brings us to our third point –

### ***3. The Consequences of this change, this resurrection.***

And there's two and the first one is this:

#### **Victory in death**

V54 <sup>54</sup> **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."**

That's what the prophet Isaiah had said – and that's what will happen.

And do you see Paul flings two questions at death. Again they're questions from the Old Testament.

Question number 1 – he asks: <sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory? You see what would it look like for death to be victorious. Well it would look like it does to many people. Death looks horrible. It's a horrible full stop at the end of life. Life is meant to be lived and death quite horribly ends it.

Just speaking personally my grandmother died fairly recently, and it is just the saddest thing because all of a sudden that relationship stops – all the things we used to love about her have just stopped.

- ⌚ She used to sing her favourite songs to us while granddad played the piano – but death has stopped that.
- ⌚ She used to make us our favourite desert: blackberry and apple pie – but death has stopped that.
- ⌚ She used to love to go for a walk with us down the country lanes where she lived – but death has stopped that.

Death is just the most awful thing isn't it? It puts a stop to our relationships – they end – they're finished. And for most people it's death which turn around and asks us – where O life is your victory? And it's a horrible thought because for many people, that's it. At the end of the day death is pretty much victorious, life is the loser - all that's left is memories, and even they're fading.

But now, after a chapter on the resurrection Paul can turn the tables and say – look it's our turn to ask the questions – <sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory? And the answer is, nowhere. On that day, imagine what it'll be like, on that day when Jesus returns and every one of his people has been raised up, and we're all standing there before the Jesus our King, thrilled with life and singing with joy. Each and everyone of us will be able to look back to that moment we died. And we'll be able to think, actually that is all it turned out to be, just a moment. And now it's gone, and even though we died we're still alive and here we are with all

eternity stretching before us. And we're saying "Where, O death, is your victory?"

But then there's question number 2 - **Where, O death, is your sting?** And Paul is picturing death as a scorpion. The only way a scorpion can harm you is if somehow it can sting you. It's got to get some poison into your system. Well what is death's sting? What is the poison that it gets into our system? Well there's the answer in v56 **The sting of death is sin** Once sin is in your system you've had it. Once you've started to rebel against God – and all of us have – once you've started to rebel against God then there's only one result – God's law declares you must die. That's why Paul says there - **the power of sin is the law**. Sin is dangerous because it breaks God's law. And death is God's execution for sin. And the sentence hangs over all of us.

But then here's Paul's question again - **Where, O death, is your sting?** In other words what's happened to our sin. Well it's been dealt with by Christ. It's as if he's removed the poison from our system. Yes we were shot through with sin. Yes the inevitable result was death, death for evermore. But when Christ died, he died for the sin which was in our lives. He's drawn the sting of death from us, he taken it upon himself. Which means that that death sentence – death for evermore, no longer hangs over us.

Now it may be that you're here this morning either just utterly mystified by what I'm saying, or maybe completely disagreeing with me. Why should we believe the Bible when it says there is life after death, and when it says the only way to heaven is by becoming a follower of Jesus. Well they are very good questions and I think that if you were to ask me afterwards I could point you in the direction of some very good answers. So if you want to do feel free to mention it to me afterwards. I'm very keen to take people's questions and doubts seriously.

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Because what Paul says here is vital – do you see he strikes two notes as he looks forward to the moment of death: he strikes a note of confidence. V54 he says **then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."** Paul has such confidence there. And so I want to ask the question – when death comes, would you be so confident, so ready to take it on? Just think for a minute the phone rings – it's for you and it's the doctor.

He says listen the results of your test have arrived and would you drop by after work to pick them up?

Well can't you tell me them over the phone doctor?

No – he says – I think you'd better come in – I need to tell you them face to face.

Well doesn't your heart begin to beat a bit faster at that moment?

And when you do get there the doctor says – it's not good – look I think you'd better set your affairs in order.

Doesn't that kind of scene worry you? Frighten you? We'd rather not think about it. But would we be ready for it? Can I be confident when death suddenly looms up like that?

And the answer of the Christian is yes – definitely – yes.

There's a note of confidence, and there's also a note of thanksgiving. V57: **<sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** In other words the Christian standpoint is one of confidence and not arrogance. They're easily confused those two things aren't they, when we talk about being sure of going to heaven we're often misheard as

being very arrogant. As if we know for sure that we've led a good enough life to get us there. Paul show he's not being arrogant. He doesn't say 'thanks be to me'. He says **thanks be to God!** The only reason I've got any kind of confidence, total confidence, the only reason is Jesus Christ - **He gives us the victory.** And so the Christian says thank you Jesus.

I wonder if you'd say that kind of confidence and that kind of thankfulness are yours?

So that's the first consequence – my resurrection, your resurrection gives victory in death.

And it also gives

### **meaning in life**

That's the second consequence.

Now it may be that someone is sitting here listening to this and thinking – well what's the point of it all? It's all so distant. ***We*** live in the here and now, we need to think about here and now things.

Well good point I suppose so I just want us to glance at the beginning and the end of this chapter. Just glance back at the beginning. Verses 1 and 2: ***1 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. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.*** That word vain. Do you see, without this gospel of resurrection – being a Christian is pointless, vain. Believing now is meaningless.

And then just glance to our last verse – v58 ***58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give***

yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. That word vain again. Because Paul's whole point is that without the resurrection, life now, everything I believe and do as a Christian, without the resurrection, it's pointless, vain. So this chapter wasn't written out of idle interest. It's intended as an intensely practical chapter. The whole aim of it is to get us to that therefore in v58. Because if verses 1-57 are true, *therefore* it makes all the difference in the here now - <sup>58</sup> **Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.**

Because what would it be like if vv1-57 weren't true? What would it be like if you took the resurrection out of reality? Well it wouldn't give us much of a future. It would mean we're not much different, as human beings, to any other animal on the planet. We're just biological machines which the universe has thrown together and which the universe will eventually pull apart, when we die.

Where did we come from – we're just accidents of the universe  
Where are we going to – we'll just die and rot and that's it.

And that's more or less, for example, what Richard Dawkins says in his book *The Selfish Gene*. 'We are all survival machines for DNA,' he says. 'A monkey is a machine which preserves genes up trees. A fish is a machine which preserves genes in water; there is even a small worm which preserves genes in German beer mats... We are machines for propagating DNA. *It is every living object's sole reason for living.*' Well, how meaningful does that makes you feel? Is that what will sustain you in life, on Monday morning? 'I must get through today so as to propagate my DNA'?

But Paul has different view. It's a better view of reality, it's the true view of reality. It's the view which says, I know this life isn't everything there is. I know that one day I will be raised to life

with Jesus. And so here's my reason for living: it's to give myself fully to the work of the Lord.

You see why is it that Paul put this chapter on the resurrection at the end of 1 Corinthians? Isn't it because he's been trying to persuade the Corinthians all along to do the work of the Lord. If you know 1 Corinthians then you'll know that it covers a range of issues – and now in chapter 15 Paul has got them to this therefore – therefore give yourselves fully to working at all the issues I've already mentioned.

Let's just have a quick glance back through the book.

#### **There's our gospel service.**

In chapter 3 he's trying to persuade the leaders of the church to build up the church – and to do it carefully, properly. And he says the reason to do it is because when Jesus returns your work will be seen for what it is. In other words – when it comes to gospel service **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**, to that small group, to that Mum's study group, to that children's group – why? **because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain**. Gospel work is something that will last into eternity.

#### **Then there's our purity**

In chapter 6 Paul tells us to keep our bodies from sexual immorality. And he says there **By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also**. So don't go using your body for immorality – it's destined for greater, holier, purer things than that – it's destined for resurrection. In other words **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**, to battling away at purity, to fighting immorality – why? **because you know that your labour in the Lord** in that area **is not in vain**. Come eternity, and you'll know the battle was worth it.

**Or again there's our sacrifices.**

In chapter 9 Paul is trying to persuade the Corinthians to put themselves out for other people. Particularly to put themselves out for their non-Christian neighbours – to be willing to make sacrifices, whatever sacrifices seem necessary, to help other people come to Christ. And he says in ch9 just imagine life as a race – with a prize in heaven at the end of the race. And the prize he seems to be talking about is seeing your non-Christian friends there in heaven with us. And so he says - **Run in such a way as to get the prize**. In other words **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**, this work of putting yourself out, of making sacrifices to see others come to Christ – why? **because you know that your labour in the Lord** in that area **is not in vain**. Come the resurrection when they are there with us – then we'll see how worthwhile it was.

**And last there's our love.**

Chapter 13 – he's trying to persuade them to love each other more, be patient he says, be kind, don't be envious, don't get proud, don't be rude, don't be self-seeking, don't get easily angered, or to sum it all up – be loving. But why? Because he says love is the one quality which will get carried over into heaven. Heaven will be a place of love. Learn to love now, because love will characterize eternity. In other words **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**, this work of loving each other **because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain**. Come the resurrection we'll see that in learning to love each other here and now, we were also learning how to live in eternity.

Now I've just picked out four things from 1 Corinthians. I'm sure if you flicked through you could find more. But the point is this – if I'm clear about the future, it'll affect the present.

CLOSE...