

Sermon 60: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58: The Last Trumpet

OUTLINE

The mystery
The victory
The duty

INTRODUCTION

Someone said, 'The best news the world ever had came from a graveyard.'¹ This 'best news' is of course the news of Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead. It is good for our sins, it is good for our bodies, it is good for our believing loved ones, it is good for our fallen world. We come now to the last section of Paul's glorious chapter on the resurrection, and he has saved the best for last. We know that some in Corinth, influenced by prevalent philosophies doubted the possibility of their own future resurrection in a physical body. Paul goes on the offensive taking us back to the very foundations of our faith, to the historical facts of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. He shows that if we deny the possibility of bodily resurrection in principle, we would be denying the resurrection of Christ; and if Christ is not raised then our sin problem is not dealt with. He shows how all our feeble thinking must give way before the irrepressible fact of Christ's resurrection. We have seen Paul patiently answer the concerns of the doubters showing that our bodies will not be resurrected as we know them now but better. He went into detail explaining the mechanism of how we received our present bodies in the First Adam; which explains how we will receive resurrection bodies like Christ who is our Last Adam. Paul pulls all of these thoughts together now in the section before us in 50-58 showing us how all of this will occur at the grand finale of the second coming of Christ at the last trumpet. Paul will then show how all of this glorious good news should motivate us in this life to a steadfast serving of God. We have three parts to this section. First Paul begins with the mystery of what will happen when Jesus comes again; second Paul grounds this certain future in the victory of Christ over death and sin; and thirdly, Paul points out our duty in light of these certainties, mystery; victory and duty.

Mystery

V50, 'I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.' Paul begins by seemingly agreeing with the concern that makes a future resurrection undesirable if not impossible. Paul tells us that 'flesh and blood' cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Does this mean that only spirits will be resurrected? Has Paul now contradicted everything he has tried to prove so far? No! 'Flesh and blood' is a Hebraism and in this instance it is not referring to future perfected bodily existence but to the weak and sin tainted bodies that we have now. In the second half of the verse he equates 'flesh and blood' with what is 'perishable.' Paul is simply repeating what he has already said, that this body as it is, this body of sin, this body of weakness, this body of death is not going to be the body that arises to dwell in the presence of God forever. So he follows v50 up with v51.

1 John Blanchard, [*The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*](#) (Webster, New York; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 537.

V51-52, 'Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² 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 shall be changed.' Paul cannot tell us about our own future resurrection bodies without sweeping all of creation up in the world changing events when Christ comes again. Paul begins by announcing that he is telling them a mystery. Mystery is a technical term for a previously unknown truth only hinted at in types and prophecies and promises now revealed by God and understood by the NT people of God, e.g. Eph. 3:3-6. Paul here reveals to us what is going to happen on the day Jesus returns. These truths apply to the 'we' of believers that Paul includes us in. There are two complimentary truths; we shall not all sleep means that not everyone is going to taste death. Some believers will be alive at the time of Christ's return, and they, like Enoch and Elijah, will not taste death. They will be instantly changed. The other truth is that all believers will experience this change of receiving a new resurrection body.

Paul describes the nature of the change: in a moment, the word in the Greek atomos from which we get the word atom, this word was used to describe what was thought to be smallest and most indivisible particle. Paul's point in using this word is to indicate an immediate change. He adds to this with 'in the twinkling of an eye,' this thought to be fastest movement of our bodies, the movement of our eye. One moment we will be in this body, and in the next we will be made new.

Paul describes when this will happen, 'at the last trumpet.' Paul tells this to the Thessalonians as well in 1 Thess. 4:15-17, 'For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.' The trumpet is often used in the OT to announce the presence of God, like at Sinai, Ex. 19:16, 'On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.' The trumpet and the day of judgement are often linked in the OT prophets, like in Joel 2:1; and Zeph. 1:14-16. This is the last trumpet. The one that brings in the day of judgement; the one that heralds the end of all things and announces Christ's arrival to come and take His bride. Now we know that there are various eschatological positions, but here we see that the last trumpet blows on the same day as the final judgement and the resurrection of all the dead. It amazes then that dispensationalists would claim that this last trumpet is not the last trumpet, but the trumpet that removes the saints from the world in the rapture, announces the beginning of tribulation and the 7 trumpets of revelation 8-11 still must follow the last trumpet. I am amazed that a hermeneutic that insists that a literal where possible approach cannot admit that the last trumpet means the last trumpet. Paul indicates that the last trumpet will signal a double reality, those living believers will be changed, and those who have died will be resurrected. If we cross reference 1 Thess. 4:15-17 with these verses Paul paints a clear and beautiful picture of Christ coming for His bride. We see a picture of our Returning Lord coming with the souls of the departed, at the last trumpet we see that they are reunited with resurrected bodies, and our own bodies are changed. And then all the glorified people of God, every OT saint; every dead Christian; every living Christian will arise as one people to meet Christ in the air.

V53, 'For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.' Paul removes the mystery and helps us see in a clearer light how it will all happen. What is interesting is to note that Christ's return, which we know includes to judge the living and the dead is preceded by our resurrection. We must not miss this order, it is incredibly encouraging for us. The resurrection precedes the judgement. There is a Jewish apocryphal and pseudipigraphal book called 2 Baruch. It was written sometime between 70 AD and the fall of Jerusalem and 135 AD, about 20 years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. 2 Baruch is not part of the Jewish scripture and written under a false name, in the name of Baruch the scribe of Jeremiah from the 6th century BC. In this book we have the typical Jewish understanding of the resurrection. In a vision Baruch ask God a question, 49:2, 'In which shape will the living live in YOUR day? Or how will remain their splendor which will be after that?' he is asking about their resurrection state. In ch50:2-4 God is said to respond, 'For the earth will surely give back the dead at that time; it receives them now in order to keep them, not changing anything in their form. But as it has received them so it will give them back. And as I have delivered them to it so it will raise them. For then it will be necessary to show those who live that the dead are living again, and that those who went away have come back. And it will be that when they have recognized each other, those who know each other at this moment, then MY judgment will be strong, and those things which have been spoken of before will come.' So the order was thought to be 1. Everyone is resurrected; 2. They are resurrected in their original bodies and will recognize each other; 3. Then there will be the judgement. 4. Only after the judgement will the righteous receive their new bodies. Paul says no! The gospel subverts these expectations and turns things on their heads. Here is part of the wonder of the gospel. Because you are justified when you believe, and the judge of the living and the dead has already ruled in your favour declaring you righteous because of Christ, and given you full assurance of the righteousness of Christ being acceptable to Him by resurrecting Him from the dead. You now go into death knowing the outcome. The day you believed your judgement day verdict was brought forward and announced over you. It was the verdict God spoke over Christ now applied to you so that His death stands as your death, so the law can have no demand upon you; and His life stands as your life securing your future resurrection when Jesus comes again and changes all of our bodies before He takes His seat in judgement we will already know the outcome. When that trumpet sounds and your body is changed, even before you have to stand before His judgement seat you will already know. You will already be dressed in your new body. You see the final judgement will not determine what your eternity holds, your faith in Christ and God's justification of you in Him has already determined that. The final judgement for the believer will be the handing out of rewards not the determining of our eternal destinies.

Victory

Paul not only wants us to see the benefits that are ours but he wants to show how all the plans of God as foretold in the scriptures are brought to their triumphant end, v54-55, 'When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Paul sweeps us up in the grand climax of God's plan of salvation when the perishable puts on the imperishable, when the mortal puts on immortality, when death itself is defeated. The first quote is taken from Is. 25:6-

9 where Isaiah is speaking of the new creation, 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." Here we see that it is not the triumph of the human spirit that will overcome death. No death is a veil over all nations. But God will swallow it up. The idea of being swallowed in defeat is a dramatic picture of being swallowed alive like in Ps.124:3. But here we see that the open grave that always swallowed the living is itself swallowed by God in defeat when it swallowed Christ. The second quote by Paul is a paraphrase of Hos. 13:14. Death which had been the victor in every exchange has now finally met its match when it went into the ring with Christ. Death, portrayed as having a venomous sting has not only had its venom but its very stinger removed. The Puritans used to talk about death as a bee. What happens to a bee when it stings you, it leaves its sting behind and it dies. Well the bee of death has stung Christ; He has drawn the sting out of death, and now it is death that must die. As William Romaine said, 'Death stung itself to death when he stung Christ.'²

How did God accomplish this greatest of defeats? Paul tells us in v56-57, 'The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.'⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' These are very dense statements by Paul alluding to the gospel that he preaches. Look firstly at how Paul links sin with death. We know that death in man is not natural but is due to Adam's first sin, as he says in Rom. 5:12, 'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.' Adam sinned because he was our representative we sinned in him; though we were not there physically we were there legally. The consequences of his actions fell upon us so that we were born not only with a criminal's nature inherited by birth but a criminal's record with Adam's sin on our account. Because of this we were born dead in sin; under the curse to die and under condemnation and destined for a lost eternity unless rescued from sin and death. The wages of sin is death and the whole human race, barring one, Jesus Christ was under its power. But notice Paul's second point, that the power of sin is the law. As sinners our biggest problem is not the self harm we do against ourselves, or the damage we do to others, or creation; it is not even the devil, our biggest problem is that we must all one day appear before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account of every deed done in the body. And there we will be tested against the law of God. The law of God is His law which stands for His justice and judgement over sin. We can only escape judgement if we satisfy the law, we will be condemned to the lake of fire if we are convicted by the law. It is the law by which we will be judged. This is one of the reasons why we use the law of God in our evangelism. We tell people about how they break God's law in order to show them that if they died today they would be judged. The law shows that every human being barring Christ is guilty of sin, has an infinite capacity to sin, and cannot stop sinning. This preaching of the law is the necessary bad news that helps people to see their need of the sin bearing

2 John Blanchard, [*The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*](#) (Webster, New York; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 141.

sacrifice of Christ. Paul thanks God for the victory He provides through Christ. How does Christ deal with the venom of sin and the accuser of the law so that we escape death and final judgement? We know how. Jesus was born as a man in order to represent us. He was born under the law in order to satisfy its demands not only in the positive life of loving God and neighbour, keeping Himself free from sin; but also to die in payment for all the ways that we had broken God's laws. Sin must be paid for before it can be forgiven. The wages of sin is death. Christ as the perfect offerer and offering gave His life in payment for our sins. How do we know His payment is enough? Because God raised Him from the dead proving that He was sinless, proving that there is no more of our sins to pay and keep Him in death, showing us the resurrection that will one day be ours in Him. have you trusted in Christ? do you see that you are a sinner in need of salvation? Do you see that you have broken His law and would justly be sentenced to hell if you died today? The gospel is the good news that announces to you that you can be saved from your sins, that God is loving and has provided a payment through Christ dying the death your sins deserved. This offer of salvation is offered freely to all those who will repent and put their trust in Christ.

Duty

V58, 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.' What tremendously good news. We have the promise of a sure resurrection before us; we have a reigning King who cannot be killed; whose reign cannot be toppled; and whose authority cannot be denied overruling in all things over us; we have the Holy Spirit as a constant companion applying the power of Christ's resurrection within us and working through us. Death has lost its power; satan has lost his hold over us, sin has been given its due date, all that remains for us now is to hold fast, to endure, to carry on, to hand ourselves over to God's work with the time that we have left. And so that is how Paul ends this glorious chapter. We see that word 'therefore' summing up our response in light of all he has been saying. 'beloved brothers' is a reminder that even though life is hard and death may seem scary we are loved by God and are overcomers, more than conquerors through Him who has loved us. The Corinthians were being challenged to change their views on the resurrection, facing a world full of sin and deception, there would be hostility from satan and an unbelieving world, so what. 'be steadfast, immovable.' Don't get distracted with the things of this life that are fading away; don't get disheartened and stop doing God's will; don't get distracted with things that don't matter, always abound, don't stop increasing in the work of the Lord. In the work of prayer, in the work of evangelism, in the work of fighting sin, in the work of being godly and raising a godly family, in the work of being salt and light, in the work of using your spiritual gifts and edifying the church that the church will be a love community that will put on display that we are His disciples; in the work of loving our enemies, our neighbour, and the needy. All of this being what we do because we know. We know that our labour, our sacrifices, our blood, sweat, and tears, our waiting, our persevering and tearful prayers are powerful in God in this life, and will be rewarded in the next. Or as C. T. Studd said, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."