

Paul has argued throughout chapter 15 for the theological reality of resurrection. The promise of our resurrection is founded on the truth of Christ’s resurrection. To deny that believers will be resurrected is, in effect, to deny that Christ was resurrected. The theology and practice of the Corinthians was inconsistent with a denial of resurrection. The resurrection body will have some continuity with this existing body, but it will be gloriously transformed and fitted for eternity.

In the closing verses of this chapter (vv. 50–58), Paul now writes about what this will actually look like. He gives us a glimpse to the future—to the second coming of Christ and the glorious transformation that believers will experience at that time.

Paul couches this closing section in the language of victory. He addresses four things.

## The Need for Victory

We usually tend to think of “victory” in military or sporting terms—sometimes in terms of obtaining “victory” over our “personal demons.” Paul talks about a far greater objective enemy over which we must all obtain victory: death.

As human beings, we must come to terms with our mortality. Paul acknowledges that “we shall not all sleep” (v. 51)—i.e. that there will be some people who do not die (“sleep”) but are alive when Jesus returns—but at the same time recognises that even those who will not “sleep” are still perishable. From the moment we are born, we fight against the dying process. Death is an enemy that will certainly overcome all of us if it is not for the victory obtained by Jesus Christ.

The believer’s ultimate destiny is the fullness of “the kingdom of God” (v. 50), but we cannot inherit that promise in our mortal bodies. As Paul has argued (vv. 35–49), a body fit for the perfect environment in which it will exist is necessary. Our natural bodies cannot live forever, and so it is necessary that believers be given a body that *can* live forever if we *will* live forever.

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*Decay, disintegration, deterioration, and loss are fought against because they are all signposts on the road that leads to death. Limitations are rebelled against to ensure ourselves that we are not moving in the direction in which we know we’re moving. The reason there is a yearning within humanity to burst these limits is that death is not natural! Individuals fight against death because it is the ultimate enemy.*

(Stephen T. Um)

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Every generation has had people who have obsessed over a desire to prolong existence. In our generation, that often takes the form of a strict exercise regimen and a healthy diet. People are increasingly concerned about the *purity* of their food—where does it come from? how does it relate to its environment? was it slaughtered ethically? These things are not necessarily wrong, but they will not help us escape the reality of death. The only escape from death is the promise of life in the gospel. And that promise will be fully realised when we are resurrected at Christ’s return.

### TO THINK ABOUT

If what Paul says is true—that we are all perishable and mortal—is there any sense in trying to prolong life through responsible diets and exercise? Should Christians fight to protect and prolong life if death is certain for all? Why, or why not?

## The Means of Victory

Human beings—both the greatest athlete and the laziest sluggard—are mortal. We all meet the same end, and there is nothing we can do to change that. The reason for this is sin: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (v. 56). The reason that death has the ability to obtain ultimate victory is because of sin. Sin is the sting that gives death power over people. This sting cannot be removed by works of the law, for the law, in fact, only highlights the power of death. It is in our futile attempts to obey the law that we show that we are sinners, which secures death’s ultimate power over us. Simply put, we have no power over sin by our own standing.

“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57). The means by which believers obtain victory over death is not human obedience, but the finished work of Jesus Christ. In Christ, death is transformed to live. He removed death’s sting for those he came to save so that death has no ultimate hold over them. As Garland observes, death’s “venom has been absorbed by Christ and drained of its potency so that the victory over death now belongs to God and to God’s people who benefit from it.”

In this life, we have but a promise and a foretaste of that ultimate victory over sin. Death still comes for us, but it is a stingless death. At Christ’s return, however, we will experience the fullness of victory. Then, “we shall all 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 shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (vv. 51–53). Only “when” that happens will death be swallowed up in victory (v. 54).

#### TO THINK ABOUT

Paul references “the law” here in relation to death and victory over death in the gospel. What role does the law play in condemning us? What role does it play in justifying us? Was it necessary for Christ to obey the law in order to rescue us from sin? Why, or why not?

### The Nature of Victory

The victory of which Paul writes here is an ultimate victory—one that will only be fully realised at the second coming of Jesus. For now, we are still subject in some way to the power of death, even though Christ took the full brunt of its sting for us. When the full victory is granted, however, death will be rendered completely impotent. When the fullness of the victory is realised, “death shall be no more” (Revelation 21:4). Then, the victory that is already God’s, through Christ, will become our victory, too.

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*God won the victory over sin and death, through Christ crucified and risen, at the first Easter in AD 33. That is an accomplished fact of history. We do not know when God will sound the last trumpet, but we do know that whenever it will be, God will give us the victory over sin and its accompaniment death which he has already won.*

(Paul Barnett)

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### The Anticipation of Victory

Victory over death is promised to all who are in Christ. There is coming a time, after the resurrection, when God’s people will no longer have to face any form of suffering or death, because sin will be completely banished from God’s new creation.

However, the promise of resurrection is not a theoretical doctrine that has relevance only in the distant future. It is a doctrine that profoundly impacts the way we live life now to the glory of God: “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain” (v. 58).

Throughout this letter, Paul has defined “the work of the Lord” as the evangelism of the lost and the edification of the church. This work is to be carried out in light of the resurrection. Our faith in future resurrection enables our evangelism because we know that eternal life and death are in the balance. Our faith in future resurrection enables our edification because we believe that all of Christ’s will ultimately be raised perfect and immortal, and so whatever strides toward Christlikeness that can be made must be made in this life.

#### TO THINK ABOUT

Does your understanding of eternity affect the way you live your life today? How so? Why is this so important?