

Sermon #988: 1 Corinthians 15:50-57 (2nd Series Epistle for Trinity 24)
11-4-12 (All Saints' Day), Bethany-Princeton MN

DEATH LOSES

Prayer: Thanks be to You, Lord God, for giving us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ! As we remember the saints in heaven, especially those who have recently gone and those we love the most, by Your word of promise give us the faith that there is no death for them, it has been swallowed up in Your victory. Give us again this comfort that they – and we who believe in You – undergo a change, and that immortality, eternal life and a glorified body are gifts from You, given for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, by faith in Him. Amen.

The Text, 1 Corinthians 15:50-57. ⁵⁰ Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹ 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying which is written: *"Death is swallowed up in victory."*

⁵⁵ *"O Death, where is your sting?*

O Hades, where is your victory?"

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your Words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen!

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

This is the reading used at the grave when the casket has been brought to its resting place and burial will soon take place. At the cemetery is where tears flow the most. It's hard to leave the grave. Although the casket is closed, your loved one's body is there. You know it's the last time you're in the presence of their body on earth. Their soul is in heaven, but it's in that body you know them.

As the tears flow at the cemetery and it takes such great effort to tear yourself away from the body of your loved one, it does not feel triumphant. In

these verses St. Paul refers to **“the sting of death.”** It does sting. It hurts. You feel weak. **“The sting of death is sin,”** it says, because the wages of sin is death. You have sin to blame for all the hurting that death causes. At that moment it feels like death wins and you lose. We call it a *loss*, and say you’ve *lost* loved ones, and we say they’re better off but we’re the ones who have *lost* something.

But these verses, the glorious conclusion to 1 Corinthians 15, the Bible’s great chapter about the resurrection, say that you have certainly not lost a loved one at all, and in fact if anyone loses it is death. That’s what St. Paul says here. He says Death loses. When you read this, you address death as a personal being and say, *“Death, you lose! Ha ha!”* It is a taunting song, which is just the opposite of how you feel at the grave. You feel as if death and the devil are taunting *you*. You feel lonely and it’s like you’re being taunted: *Why has God left you all alone?* You feel weak and it’s like you are being taunted: *Where is your strong faith now?*

So these verses are God’s gift to you. These are the words He gives you, not only to hear these words but also to say them. He puts these words in your mouth. This is the conclusion to an argument. St. Paul is meeting the challenge of skeptics who said that **“there is no resurrection of the dead”** (v. 12), and were saying things like **“How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?”** (v. 35) They’re still with us today, people who don’t believe, atheists or people who have a secular mindset, they say Christians are weak-minded, clinging to a vain hope, imagining what you wish will come true. But this argument doesn’t have to come from others. It goes on inside you. The devil uses death to introduce doubts into your mind. He wants you to think: *“What if it isn’t really true?”* So here come thoughts like *“Will I ever see him again? Where is she now?”* But thoughts and words like these don’t come from God, as these verses show.

What St. Paul writes is so opposite from how you feel at the graveside because it truly is something that has to be revealed, it can’t be known from what

you experience or see or feel. It is secret knowledge, a “**mystery**,” something they know in heaven, which – thank God! – does not remain a secret, but God has St. Paul write it down, this message comes from heaven to earth, so that it belongs in the realm of things that *can be known*. It’s the news that the dead in Christ, whom Scripture says “*sleep in Jesus*,” will not remain asleep, St. Paul writes, “**but we shall all be changed -- in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.**” Talk about the opposite of your quivering doubts, unspoken fears and lingering sadness! The sound of a trumpet! This is not just symbolic, but His trumpet is so real and will be heard unmistakably by everyone on earth, that all the trumpets you’ve ever heard will themselves seem like only a cheap imitation.

St. Paul is directed by God to write that the dead in Christ – that’s whom he means by “**we**,” not all the dead but those who believed in Christ during their lives – “**we shall be changed**,” actually he says we receive “another body.” It is the same body of the loved one you know that is buried and decays into dust, but it will be raised and “**changed**,” or as Paul writes in Philippians 3:21, “*transformed to be like Christ’s glorious body.*”

What I especially want to emphasize about this is that St. Paul says “**we shall be changed.**” There is no room for uncertainty in that sentence. It is a promise. When God says something *shall* be, He means it. Once again, as Paul says in that same verse over in Philippians 3, he does this “*according to the working by which He is able to subdue all things to Himself.*”

In a similar way, St. Paul uses the word “must” several times here. He says, “**This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.**” He is not saying that about unbelievers. Not everyone has immortality. Death does not magically transport someone into a better state. No, it is the person who during their life *repents* of their corrupt sinful nature and the sins it leads them to do, and who *believes* the good news about Jesus their Savior, St.

Paul is specifically writing about them and saying all of their corruption was removed and before God they were white as snow, part of the great white-robed host of heaven, and instead of being mortal, instead of death taking them, they put on immortality and are as immortal, as deathless, as the angels in heaven.

As St. Paul writes this he is in essence pointing at people like Lee and Dick and John and our other loved ones who believed in Christ, and at you too, and saying: **“This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”** There is no uncertainty in that statement. You and I may feel uncertain and doubts may creep in, but that is the devil’s doing and our own sinful weakness. But these are the words of God, declaring an incontrovertible fact, being spoken to you to provide you with the strength you lack and the faith you need. These words are true. There is no way that Lee, Dick, John, and all the others who believed in Christ could *not* have put on incorruption and immortality.

We know this is all based on the saving work of Jesus Christ and based on receiving this by faith which is a gift of God, because what does St. Paul begin with? The important word “inherit”: he introduces this by saying he is going to speak about how you **“inherit the kingdom of God,”** how you **“inherit incorruption.”** It is not something Lee or Dick or John earned, and they all knew that and confessed that. It is not something you can earn. It is by grace, God’s undeserved love. Jesus earned it for everyone with His perfect life and by His death on the cross that fully paid for everyone’s sins. Their faith was, and your faith is, **“the gift of God, not of works” (Eph 2:9).** So you can be even more certain that they have not died but have eternal life, because God took this burden out of their hands and took care of every bit of it by Himself.

And so, knowing all of this – as St. Paul here says, **“when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality”** – **“then shall be brought to pass the saying which is written: *Death is swallowed up in victo-***

ry. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades” – that is, “O Grave” – “where is your victory?” It has come to pass. How can you sing this taunting song to death when you are in the midst of feeling weak and sad? Christ gives you strength.

He gives you these words, He puts them into your mouth, so that as you hear them and as you say them – even when you have a hard time believing them – these words will have the power to give you the faith, the strength, and the joy and confidence that otherwise you would lack. Not only did His Word sustain them, the departed Christians, on their way, as we sing, but His Word will sustain you on your way and give you the faith you need at all times.

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Amen!