

*1 Corinthians 15:51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—<sup>52</sup>in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup>For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. <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.”*

*<sup>55</sup>“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” <sup>56</sup>The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup>But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear Friends in Our Risen-from-the-Dead Lord Jesus Christ,

We love victors, winners. It's why we turn on the game Sunday afternoon—and turn it off it is not going well. We love it when our team wins. We love winners so much so that we have Halls of Fame to remember victors decades after their wins have any meaning. Nothing wrong with that. It is good to celebrate success, to emulate successful people. Sure, some say we learn more from failure than success, but who wants to dwell on that?

We love to be winners, but what if we find ourselves on the other side of the equation? What if life isn't a march from one victory to the next. For every winner, there is at least one loser. Sometimes lots more. There is only one Superbowl champion, but there are 32 NFL teams. There is only one NCAA Division 1 national basketball champion, but there are over 350 programs. For that billion dollar Powerball jackpot about five years ago, there were *three* winners, but there were over *370 million* losers.

### **I. Victory over Death**

However, even 100 million to 1 odds are better than our chances against death. Not one of the billions of people on this planet, unless Jesus comes again in the next couple decades. No billionaire will buy his way out of death. No fighter will outmuscle it. No genius will outsmart it. Psalm 49 reflects, “*Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases. Though while he lived he counted himself blessed—and men praise you when you prosper—he will take nothing with him when he dies.*” (16-18) Victory in this life can be beneficial. It can even be used to God-pleasing ends. But success and victory are of no value beyond the fourscore years we have on this third rock from the sun.

If Death is the great enemy, then Sin is the horse he rides. Sin brought death into this world. It is sin that makes death a terror. If there were no sin in us, God would welcome us into eternity. If we perfectly did all that God wanted, we could face God with our own merits (though still no pride.)

Here's the problem: our Lord commanded us to love others more than ourselves, to love

God more than all, to speak only good of others, to *think* only good of others, to perfectly respect the authority of teacher, parent, government. We have plainly fulfilled none of these. After death, if our God should question us about every duty assigned, none could claim success.

Death will claim us as victims and sin will condemn us.

But ***“God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** Hallelujah! We are the winners, even though we did nothing! ***“God gives us the victory.”*** God’s word continually highlights human reliance on God. In the time of Joshua, when the walls of Jericho tumbled, it was God’s doing, not Israel’s. When King Hezekiah, stood on the fortified walls of his city and saw all of his enemies dead and disappeared, he knew his army had not shot one arrow. God had won the victory. When the disciples watched Jesus die on the cross and then saw him risen from the dead, they knew that he had done everything. They had done nothing. Time and again, God’s word tells us that God *gives* us the victory, like a neatly wrapped gift.

Us gaining the victory over sin and death is like preschoolers taking on the NBA all-stars. It is an impossibility. So God sent his superstar son out onto the court on our behalf, and that one-man team of Jesus Christ won the victory for us. He slam-dunked, made the three pointers, and sank the free-throws. He didn’t allow a point, not even a shot from the other guys. We were like fans in the stands, only we didn’t even do what fans in the stands do. We didn’t even pay for a ticket. It was all him. He paid for the sin we committed. He suffered the death penalty we deserved. And he rose from the dead!

That’s what our reading means when it says, ***“God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** He truly *gives* it to us. And it is 100% Jesus. Only him!

His victory over the grave on Easter declares that what Jesus promised will happen. At the end of this world ***“we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... 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.’”*** By dying and rising Jesus defeated death. He proved that he can and will give us life again, just as he promised.

## **II. Victory over Here-and-Now Defeats**

But what of this life? Does Jesus’ victory over sin and death have any effect in our day to day walk?

When I was in high school, our basketball team lost almost 40 games in a row. That was tough as a fan; I can only imagine being on the team. I can only imagine the hopelessness of stepping onto the court 25 or 30 games into that losing streak. It feels like you are just going out there to get beat up.

But a 32 minute basketball game is small potatoes compared to what life can throw at us. Some of us enter the latter part of our life and realize that it didn’t turn out anything like our optimistic, youthful imagination had hoped. Or what do you do when, in your 20’s, a car accident puts you in a wheelchair for the many remaining years of life? What of the

five-year-old who watches her family break into little pieces—she is cut loose from all the anchors of life, at five! We know people who have suffered these! We have lived some of these. These personal disasters are too many and too heart-wrenching to speak of. Where is the victory?

As children, we are taught that we can succeed. Maybe we can, in certain niches. But as we grow, we get used to the fact that life has a healthy dose of not winning together with those occasional victories. And some seem to not even be blessed with that.

What impact does ***“God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”*** have on difficult lives? Does it mean that the victory God gives only lasts as long as you are in the four walls of this building? Maybe this victory is only for certain favored people? Or maybe if this victory is for much later, we simply need to plod through life, like Eeyore—you know, the donkey in Winnie the Pooh who is the eternal pessimist—“Someday it’ll get better. But I don’t expect it will be anytime soon.”

No! Quite the opposite, when you know that God has given you the final victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, your entire life is saturated with hope. It doesn’t mean you don’t feel the pain and loss. It doesn’t mean that you rejoice in the failure. But you know that *“our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”* (2 Corinthians 4:17). You live, certain that nothing can separate you from the love of him who died for you (Romans 8:35-39). You know that he will preserve you in the faith until you are with him in heaven (Philippians 4:7). And you know that all that happens in your life will be used for the good of those who love him. (Romans 8:28).

This is not optimistic wishful thinking. Optimism and wishful thinking are built on denials of the facts. Christian hope is built on certainty. (*Where Is God When It Hurts*, 210) We know the victory God has given us. And we know that whatever sadnesses this life may hold for us, they will be swallowed up in victory when our Lord comes again in glory.

### **III. An Outlook Focused on the Victory**

To fully enjoy this hope in our lives, we need to cultivate a more heavenly-minded outlook. There are some preachers out there who continually center their message in this world on having wealth and success. These are some of the most prominent and publicized preachers out there. Their popularity is rooted in the fact that we human beings are *not* heavenly-minded by nature. They always talk about the short game. And that is what we want! We always want what is right in front of us, easy to reach, quick to enjoy. We would rather be comfortable for a day, than have a certain and sure comfort forever in heaven.

Change your perspective. Find joy in something beyond this life.

Some of the most full-of-hope Christians you will find are people who live day and night with suffering. They find that their difficulties help them have a heavenly minded outlook. The patient with advanced MS knows that almost certainly, she will not walk again. Persecuted Christians in an anti-Christian society—and here I speak not of our own nation, but of many others in the world who face much greater obstacles because they confess Christ; who are at risk of abduction or murder, who lose societal privileges, who are

taxed at a higher rate because of their Christian testimony—these persecuted Christians know that the cards are stacked against them and that they will not succeed in worldly terms. The businessman who refuses to shave the rules often finds the playing field tilted against him. Christians who face these continual difficulties learn to have a heavenly-minded view of life. They look, not for the praise and rewards of this world, but forward to the courts of heaven.

And so we see a second victory that God gives us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only does Jesus deliver us from sin and death, but through his guarantee of eternal life he also delivers us from the hopelessness that life in this world can produce.

So when you have the worst happen to you, when the world calls you an outcast, a loser, you can still say with conviction, ***“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** And when you are successful in the here and now, you don’t get on a high horse and all full of yourself, but you still say with gratitude, ***“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

#### **IV. Offering Thanks to God**

Which is why we listen to and obey God. At least I hope it is.

Let me ask you: When it comes down to it, why do *you* obey God? Do you obey him out of fear? Or do you obey him because you are worried about the afterlife, and hope that maybe you will squeak through if you can be good enough, often enough, for long enough? Do you obey God out of nothing but duty-bound obedience: because you don’t want people pointing fingers at you?

If any of these are your reasons for obeying God, then listen again to the first words of verse 57: ***“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.”*** It is the reason a five-year old picks flowers for his mom: simple thankful love. God-pleasing obedience is smiling joy over what Jesus has done for us. That joy creates a desire to daily thank him.

Thanks be to God, the Victor over sin and death, our provider of eternal life, our hope while in this world. Amen.

*This is an adaptation of a sermon I prepared for June 25, 2017, on the sermon text of 1 Corinthians 15:57.*

1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Isaiah 25:6-9; Luke 24:1-12 4/16/2022

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But here's the problem: our Lord commanded us to love others more than ourselves, to love God more than all, to speak only good of others, to *think* only good of others, to perfectly respect the authority of teacher, parent, government. We have plainly fulfilled none of these. After death, if our God should question us about every duty assigned, none could claim success.

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By paying sin's debt, Jesus destroyed death's power to destroy our eternity. For Jesus' people, death is a doorway into the eternal presence of God.

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