

*1 Corinthians 15:57 Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear Friends in Our 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. So much so that we have Halls of Fame to remember victors for decades after their wins have any meaning. Nothing wrong with that. It is good to celebrate success, to emulate successful people. Sure, people say we learn more from failure than success, but for all the blather, how many of us prefer failure to victory?

We love to be the 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 winner, but there are 32 pro football teams. There is only one NCAA Division 1 national basketball champion, but there are 351 programs. For that huge Powerball jackpot last year, there were *three* winners, but there were over *370 million* losers.

However, even 100 million to 1 odds are too good for our chances against death. Not one of the billions of people on this planet, unless Jesus comes again in the next couple decades, not one of the billions will outwit the great enemy, death.

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

Here is the truth of it: Death will happen to all, no matter how successful, how victorious the person. No billionaire will buy his way out of it. No fighter will outmuscle death. No genius will outsmart it. All of the successes of this world prove useless in its face. 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 temporary and 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. And it is sin that makes death such a terror. For if there were no sin in us, God would welcome us into eternity. If we perfectly did all that God wanted, we would be able to face God on the other side of death.

But 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 we were assigned, none could claim success.

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

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.***" This was highlighted in several of our Vacation Bible School lessons this week. When the walls of Jericho tumbled, it was God's doing, not Israel's. When King Hezekiah, stood on the fortified walls of besieged Jerusalem and saw all of his enemies dead and disappeared, he knew his army had not shot one arrow, but that 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. This week, time and again, the lesson was 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 didn't even do what the 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.

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% *through our Lord Jesus Christ*. Only him!

This is the first victory that Jesus won for us. By paying sin's debt, death's power to destroy our eternity is gone. Now death is a doorway into the eternal presence of God.

## II. Victory over Other Defeats

But what of this life? How 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 down that losing streak. You have this feeling that you are just going out there to get beat up.

But that is small potatoes compared to what life can throw at us. We get beat up by more serious things than a 32 minute basketball game.

Some of us enter the latter part of our life and realize that life 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 more. Where is the victory?

As children, we are taught and believe that we can succeed. Maybe we can, in certain niches. But we also find out that, for most of us, there are not a lot of things we can win at, so we get used to the fact that life has a healthy dose of not winning together with 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? Is it just an imaginary victory? Maybe this victory is only for certain favored people? Or maybe if this victory is for later, we simply need to plod through life, like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh, the eternal pessimist. "Someday it'll get better. But I don't expect it anytime soon."?

No! Quite the opposite, when you know that God has given you the final victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, when you know that the worst that life can throw at you is swallowed up in the victory of Christ Jesus, 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 failures. 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 and maybes. 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, it will be

swallowed up in victory when our Lord comes 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. Let us think about heaven. Let us stop obsessing on what will happen to us and our families today and tomorrow and next year, and think about our eternal future.

Part of the reason for the success of preachers, who call themselves Christians but who overlook the core message of Christ, who continually center their message on having wealth and success in this world—the reason these preachers are so successful is that we are so not-heavenly-minded. They always talk about the short game. And we always want what is right in front of us, right now. We would rather be comfortable today for a short while, than have a certain and sure comfort forever in heaven.

Let our hope and joy be 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) knows 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. People 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 type of 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.”*** This is my hope.

### IV. Offering Thanks to God

Which is why we listen to and obey God.

Or is it? 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 you hope that maybe you will squeak through if only 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 able to point fingers at you? Or maybe you just plain don't obey except just enough to keep up appearances.

If any of these are your reasons for obeying God, then you just don't get it! The first words of our reading tell us why we obey God: ***“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 else has done for us. And what more sincere smile and joy can there be than from forgiveness! What a desire it creates in us to do what he wants.

Thanks be to God, our Savior from ourselves, our Mighty Fortress for this life, and our provider of eternal life. Amen.