

THE MYSTERY IN THE BODILY RESURRECTION
1 Corinthians 15:50-58
July 16, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Movie *A Few Good Men*:

Col. Jessep (Jack Nicholson): You want answers?

Kaffee (Tom Cruise): I think I'm entitled to them.

Col. Jessep: You want answers?

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Col. Jessep: You can't handle the truth!

If we were to change the characters in this dialogue and the object from “truth” to “glory,” we would approach the topic with which Paul concludes this marvelous chapter on the resurrection of the body. The dialogue then would take us to the end of Exodus 33 where we have the following conversation between Moses and God:

Exodus 33:18-20 – Then Moses said, “I pray You, show me Your glory!”¹⁹ And He said, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”²⁰ But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (trans. – “You can't handle My glory!”)

We see the fact that man is unable to handle the glory of God in other places in Scripture. In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah (a prophet was one who was close to God) is able to catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

Isaiah 6:1-5 – In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.³ And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.”⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.⁵ Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”

In Revelation 1 we have perhaps the fullest illustration of this from John's vision of the Lord.

Revelation 1:12-17 – Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands;¹³ and in the middle of the lampstands *I saw* one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.¹⁴ His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire.¹⁵ His feet *were* like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice *was* like the sound of many waters.¹⁶ In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.¹⁷ When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man.

Each of these illustrates man's incapacity to handle the glory of God. In the past weeks we have seen Paul's carefully constructed argument of the importance of a bodily resurrection. Some at Corinth denied this doctrine and in doing so muddled the truth of the gospel. Last week we saw that our physical bodies will be changed by the power of God at the Lord's return, that our bodies would be made fit to stand in the presence of the Almighty for all eternity. As I meditated on this truth this week, I asked myself the question, "Why must we be changed?" Paul answers that question in our text this morning by showing that *our bodies must be changed to be able to handle the glory of God.*

I. The Mystery Revealed (15:50-53)

Paul begins his conclusion on the matter of the bodily resurrection by once again referring to these who denied this truth as "**brethren.**" There can be no mistake that Paul, as he has done throughout this letter in pointing out the many faults in the church, considered these who were wrong-minded concerning this doctrine to be Christians. Paul nowhere denied the fact that these Corinthians bore the marks of true disciples. Their Christianity was evidenced not only in their understanding of the gospel but in their assent to their need for the gospel and that Christ was the only remedy for their enmity with God born from a sinful heart. In other words, these at Corinth had "confessed with their mouth Jesus as Lord" and "believed in" their "heart that God raised him from the dead" (Rom 10:9). Paul here further considers the doctrine of a bodily resurrection.

1. The context of this mystery (vv. 50, 53)

In v. 51, Paul writes, "**Behold, I tell you a mystery.**" A mystery is a truth that remains hidden until it is revealed. Curtis Vaughan wrote that a "**mystery**" "denotes a divine truth undiscoverable apart from divine revelation. The word is generally used by Paul of a truth not known (fully) by previous generations but is now made clear in the gospel" (*1 Corinthians*, 163). But before the divinely inspired Paul reveals the mystery, he reminds the Corinthians of the context of the mystery in v. 50, "**Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.**" There are a few things we notice in this statement.

First, there is an inheritance that awaits the believer. We first read of this inheritance in the Abrahamic Covenant. Moses reminded God of this inheritance in Exodus 32:13, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.'" Psalm 37 repeatedly refers to the land that the righteous will inherit. So the inheritance that awaits the believer is a *place*, a dwelling place that Jesus told His apostles that He was going ahead of them to prepare (Jn. 14:6), the place that Paul here refers to as "**the kingdom of God,**" elsewhere referred to in Scripture as heaven, the promised land of eternal life with God and Christ.

But this inheritance is not only a *place*, but a *privilege*. In Romans 8:16-17 Paul wrote, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him.*" Here Paul asserts that the believer has the great privilege of being called a child of God. One of the privileges of our justification is that God adopts into His family. At that moment, Paul says, we rightfully become "heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ." What

this means is that all of the privileges and blessings that are rightfully Christ's because of His perfect obedience to God the Father are the believers as well. We are co-heirs with Christ. So the inheritance that awaits the believer at the Lord's return is both a *place* and a *privilege*.

The second thing we notice about the context of this mystery is that this inheritance is not for our physical bodies as they currently exist. Paul writes, **"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."** **"Flesh and blood"** refers to these earthy bodies, our physical bodies as fitted by God for life on this earth. These bodies, Paul says, **"cannot inherit the kingdom of God"** because they are **"perishable,"** decaying, deteriorating, defiled as a consequence of sin and therefore are unable to **"inherit the imperishable"** because they are unfit. The apostle Peter also spoke to this truth,

1 Peter 1:3-5 – Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Therefore, Paul writes in v. 53, **"This perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."** In other words, these earthy bodies must be made fit for the kingdom of God. The **"must"** here is twofold. First, **"this perishable must put on the imperishable"** to be able to stand in the presence of the glory of God for all eternity. This is the essence of Paul's argument. Our bodies in their current state, as we saw in our opening from the Scriptures, are unable to handle God's glory. No man, in this physical body, can see God and live. The **"perishable"** and **"mortal"** body is incapable to stand in the presence of God's glory.

But there is another aspect to this **"must"** from God's perspective. His character is at stake. Jesus said that He was going to prepare a place for us and that He would return to take us to that place. As we just read in 1 Peter, Peter wrote that our inheritance is imperishable and undefiled and that it will not fade away, therefore our bodies must be made fit to endure that which is eternal. Peter further said that this inheritance was reserved in heaven, *protected by God Himself*, with the promise that it would be fully and finally revealed in "the last time." This is the glorification that awaits all believers when the Lord returns and it is guaranteed because God has secured it. Therefore, **"this perishable must put on the imperishable,"** a body fitted by God for God or else God is a God who is unable to keep His promise.

So the context of the mystery of the bodily resurrection is that this **"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."** These earthy bodies are incompatible with the eternal order and unfit to stand in the presence of the glory of God.

2. The content of this mystery (vv. 51-52)

Paul writes, **"Behold, I tell you a mystery."** **"Behold"** is emphatic and is better translated, "Look!" or "Listen up!" Paul arrests the attention of the Corinthians by telling them to "take notice!" of the mystery he is about to reveal. There are three things we see concerning this mystery.

First, Paul says, **"We will not all sleep."** We have seen in past messages that Paul's reference to sleep is in reference to the death of a believer. They simply **"sleep."** Death is not final for them because they will be awakened from their slumber when the Lord returns. Some believe that Paul here teaches that he believed that the Lord would return in his lifetime.

However, this is to press Paul's statement too far. Paul had already shown in this letter that he himself might be raised and to be raised meant that he would first have to die. Remember, the resurrection refers only to those who have died. The living at the Lord's return will not be resurrected but transformed. Further, the question with the Corinthians in this entire chapter has not concerned the living, but the dead in Christ. Paul addresses the question of the living in 1 Thessalonians. But here his argument for the resurrection concerns those who had died. This was the issue at hand in Corinth. And further, as we will see in a moment, Paul did not know, nor does anyone know, when the Lord will return. So Paul's statement "**we will not all sleep**" simply means that all will not be dead when the Lord returns, whenever that might be. This statement is as true for us as it was for them.

The second thing we see concerning this mystery is that believers "**will all be changed.**" "**All**" refers to all believers, alive and dead at the Lord's return. They will "**all be changed.**" The physical body of the believer, dead or alive, will not be abandoned, destroyed, or even totally recreated, but "**changed.**" As we noted last week, there will be a difference in these earthy bodies and our spiritual bodies, but the "**changed**" body, whether by resurrection of the dead or transformation of the alive will be a change that fits these earthy bodies for the presence of the Lord for all eternity.

The third thing we see in this mystery is that it *will be instantaneous and final*. In v. 52 Paul says it will take place "**in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.**" It will not be a process, a spiritual metamorphosis like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. It will be instantaneous. "**Moment**" is the Greek word *atomos*, from which we get our word "atom," the smallest conceivable thing to us. Paul is stating that this change will take place in the smallest timeframe we can imagine. "**The twinkling of an eye**" refers to a rapid movement. One pastor said it will be an amount of time equal to one flutter of a hummingbird's wings or to a blink of our eyelid. So this mystery that Paul speaks of will be instantaneous.

But it will also be final, "**at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.**" This trumpet blast will mark the conclusion of redemptive history. At that moment, all believers from all of creative history will be made fully and finally fit for God's glory. Not a single one of God's people will be overlooked because, as we have seen, God Himself has promised and secured it. "**The dead will be raised imperishable,**" forevermore! That is the mystery of the resurrection.

The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of Heaven breaks;
The summer morn I've sighed for—the fair, sweet morn awakes:
Dark, dark hath been the midnight, but dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land. [*The Sands of Time Are Sinking*]

II. The Mystery Displayed (15:54-58)

There is something that happens when this change takes place that should affect the way we live our lives on this earth. The mystery of the resurrection is evidences in three ways.

1. Victory (vv. 54-56)

Paul here pens the words that are so familiar to us, "**When this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory.'**"⁵⁵ **'O DEATH, WHERE**

IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?” Paul quotes two Old Testament passages, Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14, to remind the Corinthians of the ultimate victory at the resurrection, victory over death. The first quote looks back to Jesus’ triumph over death in His resurrection and forward to the resurrection of all believers that is secured in Jesus’ bodily resurrection as their “first fruits” (v. 20). In quoting Hosea, Paul asks these questions tauntingly, **“O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?”** He then answers these questions in v. 56 with a thorough explication of the doctrine of sin.

First, **“death”** is a result of **“sin.”** Paul wrote in Romans 5:12, **“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”** **“Death”** is a result of the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and the fact of original sin and the guilt of original sin is passed on to all their posterity. We sin because we are born sinners, and our death is a consequence rendered by God for our sin. While our death might come from sickness, accident, violence, or simply by old age, these are merely secondary causes of sin itself. Sin is their source, but **“death”** itself is the ultimate result of **“sin.”**

Second, **“sin”** inflicts the **“sting of death”** through **“the law,”** which Paul says is **“the power of sin.”** In other words, Paul says that just as death is a result of sin, sin is a result of the law. Paul touched on this truth in Romans 4:15, “For the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.” God’s law reveals God’s holy standard and when that law is broken, it reveals man’s sin. The law sets before us the standard and when this standard cannot be reached, it is sin’s stronghold. The **“sting”** is not **“death,”** but **“sin.”** Calvin wrote, “Death has no other weapon except sin, with which to wound us, since death comes from the wrath of God. But God is angry only with our sins; do away with sin then, and death will not be able to harm us any more... it is the *Law* of God that gives that sting its deadly power” [from Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 586].

2. Thanksgiving (v. 57)

But man is not hopeless because of sin and death. Paul returns to the grace of the gospel, **“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Paul asked the question in Romans 7:24, “Who will set me free from the body of this death?” His jubilant answer is, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” This is the joy of victory that will be visibly demonstrated in the life of the believer because he has Christ as his victor. Jesus Christ died for our sins and conquered death for us in His resurrection. By His death he has set us free from the bondage and the power of sin and its penalty of death as well. The believer has been declared righteous with God through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the imputation of His sins onto Christ. Those who by grace trust Christ as Lord and Savior based on His finished work of atonement for sin have victory over sin and death. By faith we rejoice in the defeat of Satan, death, hell and the grave. We rejoice because we know that what Christ said of Himself in all of His glory to John in Revelation 1:17-18 is true. “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.’” We too share in Christ’s victory because we share in His death and life.

The importance of the bodily resurrection of the saint is exploded into thanksgiving and praise by Paul. To deny the bodily resurrection is to deny the victory. Either Christ has risen

from the grave and defeated sin and death, and we with Him, or there is no victory. And if there is no victory, then there is no salvation. So those who trust in the saving merits of Christ's death and resurrection must believe this mystery. And their belief will be displayed in praise and thanksgiving.

3. Service (v. 58)

Paul concludes his opus on the resurrection in showing that this thanksgiving for the victory we have in Christ Jesus will be demonstrated in our service on this earth. He once again calls them not only **"brethren"** but **"my beloved brethren."** It was out of his love for them that he set out to correct their error of doctrine and practice. He exhorts them to **"be steadfast, immovable"** as it concerned the Word of God, the Word that he had preached to them and told them to hold fast to (15:2). They must stand firm concerning the resurrection of the dead because to deny it undermines the gospel itself. He encourages them to **"always abound in the work of the Lord"** because that work **"is not in vain in the Lord."** This hearkens back to the beginning of the chapter where he reminded them that their very salvation was secure in the gospel that they believed, unless they believed in vain (v. 2). A necessary part of that gospel was the resurrection. If there were no resurrection, then his preaching was vain and their faith also was vain. But Paul has shown that there is a resurrection that awaits the believer in Christ. And these Corinthians could know that their service for the Lord based on a belief of a full and final victory in Him at His return was not in vain. If there is no resurrection, then their faith is vain and their works of service are vain. But there will be a resurrection of the saint. So our faith is not in vain and our works are no in vain.

Conclusion