

Total Transformation
1 Cor 15:51-57
Tim Anderson 23/5/21

Death is a terrorist.
It terrorises the human race.
You really don't have to look far for the evidence.
I was talking with a local small business owner during the week.
He's just been given a year or so to live.
He's only in his 50s.
He has a son still in high school.
He's a single father.
There's no obvious answer as to how his kids will be looked after.
I was talking with him
and you could sense what an outrage it is.
He's not happy about where things are at.
And there's nothing he can do about it.
He hadn't even told his kids his prognosis yet when I was speaking to him.
It's such an awful reality,
he wants to shield his boys as long as he can.
He's dealing with a terrorist.

And look his situation is worse than most.
He's dying younger than most Australians.
But really death is always a terrorist.
It's always doing violence to relationships.
It always causes heartache and pain.

Sometimes people talk about having a good death.
That's what the word 'euthanasia' means -
good death.
Well I guess you can have a good death

by comparison with some other deaths.
It's far more pleasant to die in your sleep and never feel a thing,
than to die wracked with pain for a long period of time.
No question about that.
But even the so called good death
is not really good.
It still breaks relationships.
It still causes grief for those left behind.
And it still spells the end of someone's chance
to get things right with God,
if they haven't already done that.

Death is a great evil.
And I think we need to face that.
Our community,
unlike any other community in the history of the world,
doesn't face death.
We prefer to treat it like an ostrich.
Bury our heads in the sand.
We don't talk about it.
Even in my life time,
we've invented new ways of avoiding mentioning the word.
They talk about someone 'passing'.
I have vowed that I will never use that reality avoidance strategy.
We hide people in hospitals and nursing homes
so that death very rarely happens in the home.
It's a way of not having to deal with reality.
The nurses and the undertakers take care of all that.
We dress people up in their best clothes after they have died.
We even give corpses a shave so they look their best if there's a viewing.
Did you know that whiskers keep growing
for a couple of days after you die?

It's all in the name of pretending that it's not really true.

But brothers and sisters, we don't need to be like that.

We don't need to play pretending games.

Please don't shave my corpse when I'm dead.

I don't care if I have a three day growth when you cremate me.

Let's focus on the truth that is important,
not things that just don't matter.

Because the truth is so encouraging.

Pretending games are for people who can't face reality.

But for us, reality is fantastic.

We don't have to worry about dressing up bodies in their best clothes.

Because we have the promise of resurrection bodies.

That's what excites us.

So our passage begins.

15:51 "Listen, I tell you a mystery:

We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed."

Now here's a thing.

When you read the word mystery in the Bible,
you shouldn't think Agatha Christie or Hercule Poirot.

A mystery in the Bible is not something mysterious,
something where the truth is yet to be discovered,
something that requires detective work.

And it's worth knowing this because it's not only true here.

It's the same in Romans or Ephesians or Colossians.

A mystery in the Bible is something that was hidden in the past,
but it has now been revealed.

It's been revealed to us by the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The people in the Old Testament were not dumb.

It's just that God had only revealed part of his plans for the future,
up until the coming of Christ.

But now we know more.
Jesus has revealed more.
So here's something we know now,
that they didn't know in the Old Testament.
Some of the Corinthian church had been Jews.
They couldn't go and look up their Bibles to find this out.
It had only been revealed through Christ.
"We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed."
When he says sleep he means die.
I've explained that in earlier weeks,
so I'll be brief.
For the Christian death is temporary, so Paul describes it as sleep.
We not all going to die but we are all going to be changed.
There's no question that the people who have died
are going to need a new body in the resurrection.
Their body has decayed in the grave or been burned.
They are going to need a new one.
But what about those who are still alive when Jesus returns?
Can they go to heaven with the body they have?
No they can't.
Your current body is not fit for purpose in the new creation.
15:53 "For the perishable must cloth itself with the imperishable,
and the mortal with immortality."
It's no good taking your perishable body to heaven with you.
You need an imperishable one there.
You wouldn't take your Toyota Yaris drag racing.
You wouldn't surf the Hawaii pipeline
on a bogie board you bought at Kmart.
You wouldn't bring a \$300 Chinese violin along,
if you got a job in the MSO.
You don't turn up to Bible College with a children's Bible.
And you won't be in heaven with your current body.

God has better plans for you than that.
God's got your Maserati for drag racing.
He's got your Stradivarius for the MSO.
That's what kind of body you have waiting for you.
And that's why you don't need to dress up your Yaris in the coffin.
Forget about the Yaris.
Focus on the Maserati.
This is as close as you are going to get me to doing prosperity preaching.
Please note, I'm not talking about literal Maseratis like Joel Osteen.
This is a metaphor for your resurrection body.

15:54-55 "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."
Are you living a victorious life, brother?
Are you claiming his victory, sister?
Well notice the time frame.
When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable.
That is when Jesus comes back.
That's when death is swallowed up by victory.
It's a very fine balancing act.
We can't reach into heaven
and pull all of the future that God has for us into this life.
But then neither can we live as if the blessings God has for us don't exist.
And nor can we ignore
that some of the blessings of God's Kingdom
are available now in the present.
Some Christians talk about victory all the time.
Victory over whatever day to day problems you might be facing.
God may or may not grant you victory over those problems.
Some Christians get healed of their sicknesses when they pray.

Others don't.

It's not got to do with their technique in praying.

It's not like if you just say the right words in the right order.

Or you say "In Jesus Name" in quite the right tone.

Then God will grant your request.

This is not 'wingardium leviosa'.

That's not how the God who make the world works.

It's just about God's sovereign choice.

When I was in Fiji a couple of years back,

there was a spate of healings amongst the Indian Fijians,
and nothing spectacular amongst ethnic Fijians.

What was going on?

Did the ethnic Indians have more or better faith?

No.

God was authenticating a new work of his Spirit
amongst the ethnic Indians.

There had been not much gospel fruit
amongst the ethnic Indians for decades.

And then considerable numbers came to faith all at once.

And in this new work of the Spirit,
many were also healed of their sicknesses.

It is a powerful witness to the Indians who remain Hindus,
that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ reigns.

That Brahma and Vishnu can't hold a candle to him.

Well here's the point of the story.

We get some little victories now.

And as a non Pentecostal in Australia,

I need to be careful not to minimise the extent of those little victories.

But for the real victory, we have to wait.

We have to wait until the perishable is clothed with imperishable.

That's when we can cry out,

"Death has been swallowed up in victory!"

15:55 "Where, O death is your victory?"

Where, O death is your sting?"

Until then, the basic shape of the Christian life is suffering now, glory later.

That's how it was for Jesus.

That must be how we expect it to be for us.

Ok, it's time for a little sidetrack.

I was given warning prior to this sermon, that if I didn't do some explaining of the parallel passage in 1 Thessalonians, then I would get some questions afterwards.

So here goes.

I'll read you the 1 Thessalonians 4 parallel.

1 Thess 4:13-17 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are left

will be caught up together with them in the clouds
to meet the Lord Jesus in the air.
And so we will be with the Lord forever."

What's the difference between the 1 Cor passage and the 1 Thess passage?
Well the question that motivates the two accounts is different.
In 1 Cor, Paul is struggling to convince people who are overly spiritual,
that they are going to have bodies in the resurrection.
So there is a lot more focus on the resurrection body.
How the resurrection body is imperishable and immortal,
so the Corinthians don't think
they will be getting a dud deal in the new creation
because they have to put up with these creaking groaning bodies of ours.
In 1 Thess, Paul is talking to a church
that is worried that their members who have died
might be going to miss out on the Kingdom of God.
That only people who are still alive when Jesus returns
will get to be part of the Kingdom.
And Paul is saying, "No, no, no.
Everyone with faith in Christ will be part of the kingdom.
Whether they have died or they're alive when Jesus returns."
So there's more of a focus in 1 Thess
on what actually happens on judgement day.
And in particular that the dead believers don't miss out.

And part of that, which was specifically mentioned to me,
is the bit about meeting the Lord in the air.

What's that all about?

Well I don't find it at all improbable.

We remember the story of the Ascension of Jesus.

It happened this week in the church's calendar.

He was with his disciples on a hill outside Jerusalem

40 days after the resurrection.

And he was taken up before their very eyes.

Well if Jesus in his resurrection body could get taken up from the earth, and our resurrection bodies are going to be patterned on his, then I don't have any problems believing that on the last day, we will meet him in the air.

OK that's the end of the sidetrack.

And we are back to 1 Cor.

1 Cor 15:56 "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law."

I haven't preached on this passage too often at funerals.

It would be a good passage.

But you feel like you should finish at verse 55.

The great victory chant.

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

That sort of feels like the climax.

And the last couple of verses feel like the person making a toast who doesn't quite know when to finish and sit down.

But Paul wasn't writing for the feel good factor.

He was helping his readers to know God and his ways.

So let's think about it.

A key to understanding this verse

is to know that the word 'of' in Greek can mean 'that causes'.

We wouldn't usually use 'of' like that in English,

which makes the verse sound a bit strange.

So let me over translate.

The sting that causes death is sin,
and the power that causes sin is the law.

Well we know that.

Rom 6:23 "The wages of sin is death."

We know it from the garden of Eden.
Death didn't come into the world until Adam and Eve sinned.
There is a connection between sin and death.
It's an unbreakable connection.
And the flip side of that is also true.
There is a connection between forgiveness of sin and resurrection.
There's no entry to the Kingdom of God without your sins being forgiven.
Well Paul might have been thinking about the 21st century
when he included that verse.
Because so much of the church
wants to talk about the victory and the kingdom
but doesn't want to talk about the need for forgiveness of sins.
It's all too negative for them.
It's not victorious enough.
But the connection must be maintained.
Let me assure you,
if we only talk about victory and the kingdom,
we will very soon be winking at behaviour
that will have people excluded from the kingdom.
No one is included in the kingdom without repentance.
And if we aren't talking about the forgiveness of sins,
then how are people going to know that they need to repent?

But the flip side of that is,
once people have repented.
Then we need to celebrate the victory.
We can't live in this world of perpetual self flagellation.
No. Jesus nailed our sins to the cross.
They are dead and buried.
And now we look forward to our resurrection bodies in the new creation.
I want to drive that Maserati.
And that's where our reading finishes.

But thanks be to God!

He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's victory on the other side of repentance.

It's victory for most of us on the other side of death.

Though there will be some who don't die,
who are just changed.

But whatever.

We look forward to enjoying our victory
won for us through the Lord Jesus.

Let's praise him for it!