



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

“The Mystery of the Lord’s Coming”

TRANSCRIPT

Well, it’s 7:30. Let’s open our class with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee and praise Thee for the opportunity that is again ours to study the Scriptures together. We thank Thee for the apostle and for his faithfulness in communicating the word of God to his generation and then to ours as well. We thank Thee for submissiveness to the Holy Spirit that enabled him to receive the message perfectly and transmit it to us.

We thank Thee, Lord, for our great Triune God in heaven: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who together, have determined that it would be just this, that we should have the inspired word of God, that the great plan of salvation should be successfully completed to the present day. We have confidence with regard to the future as well. And we know that ultimately, we shall see the fulfillment of the perfect will of God to the glorification of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And we thank Thee, Lord, for the way in which, day by day, these great truths affect our lives. We thank Thee for the assurance that, as we commit our daily life to Thee, that Thou wilt take over, that Thou wilt be the governor of our lives, that Thou wilt use us, that Thou wilt bless us, that Thou wilt deliver us, and that Thou wilt ultimately

conform us to the image of the Son of God. We thank Thee for the confidence that this gives us.

We thank Thee for the priesthood of our Lord who, at this very moment, as we are here, is praying for us. What great confidence and encouragement and sense of security is ours through all that Thou hast done. We thank Thee, Lord. We praise the Father. We praise the Son. We praise the Holy Spirit. We glorify our God.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Message] Well, we’re drawing near the end of the study of 1 Corinthians, and we are actually at the end of our study of this great chapter, chapter 15. This is the chapter on the resurrection of the body, as we know from beginning, all the way through to the end. Last Sunday, in the “New York Times,” in the review section, the book review section, there was a review of a book by Carolyn Walker Bynum. The title of the book was “The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity from the years 200 through the year 1336.” I’m sorry, I didn’t know about this until we finished the chapter on 1 Corinthians, but it would have been nice to read some of the things that people have said about the resurrection of the body. Some of them are rather amusing. A couple of them were mentioned in the review article.

For example, Tutelian, the early church father, says that, “We will not chew in heaven, but we will have teeth because we would look funny without teeth.” Well, I agree with that second sentiment. I don’t know what we’re going to do about teeth when we get to heaven. I’m worried about my teeth now, not about heaven, but I do think we might look funny if we did not have teeth.

Cyprian, the Carthage -- bishop of Carthage tells us that, “Women should not wear face powder in this life lest God failed to recognize them in the life that is to come.”

Well, we do have some Christian theologians today. There are several of them. They’re writing books, and they are known as evangelicals. Clark Pinnock is one of them

who deny the omniscience of our Triune God in heaven. So that would be an instance of that, because to affirm that our Lord would be unable to recognize the ladies if they didn’t have their makeup on, is surely an attack upon his omniscience. So I’m sorry that I didn’t have a chance to read some other pearls that undoubtedly have been part of the history of the doctrine of justification of the resurrection of the body.

But anyway, we are coming to the mystery of the Lord’s coming in 1 Corinthians 15:50 through 58, and I’d like to read the verses now. So if you have a New Testament, we begin at verse 50 and finish the chapter.

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - 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. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: *‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’* (Now, if you have a Bible with some marginal notes, you’ll notice that that’s from Isaiah chapter 25 in verse 8. And then verse 55 follows, and this is from Hosea chapter 13 in verse 14,) *‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’* (And let me also stop here. Some of you have, O grave” or “Hades” and some of you have in your text “death.” Death is probably correct. Of course, the concept that is expressed by this, this taunt of death and Hades is true to fact, but nevertheless, the chances are that verse 55 should read, “O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?” Then Paul concludes,) The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law. But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, (That was one of the favorite

words of Aristotle, the philosopher, “be immovable) always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

Well, this is the conclusion of one of the greatest of the chapters of the New Testament. In one sense, I hate to come to the end of it because every time that I have taught this, I’ve learned something new and fresh, and I think I have this time as well. But we must come to the end of one of the great chapters, and I remember it as very significant for our Christian faith and for the Christian doctrine.

Why is it necessary that there be a resurrection of the body? Why should we not just enter heaven and as a spirit, float around -- now that’s a bad term. That suggests that that wouldn’t be so good -- but just move around without this body. Why is it necessary that we should have a body? Well, in our last meeting, I made reference to one of the texts that Paul uses in Romans chapter 8, which at least gives us an understanding of why, in biblical doctrine, it’s important that we have the resurrection of the body. And we’ve made the point over and over again that when we talk about resurrection, we’re not talking about living again spiritually. We’re talking about the resurrection of the body. Many theologians have said this, but it bears saying again. If we do not speak of the resurrection of the body, we should not speak of the resurrection at all. It is the resurrection of the body -- now, not the present body in the sense that it will be characterized by corruptibility and all of the weaknesses of our aging body. We’re talking about the resurrection body, the spiritual body. A true continuity with this body but, nevertheless, different. The resurrection of the body that is a spiritual body connected with this body is the teaching of the word of God.

Well, back in chapter 8 in verse 23 of the Epistle to the Romans, the apostle wrote, “Not only that” -- well, verse 22 says, “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that but we also, who have the firstfruits of the spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves eagerly waiting for the

adoption, the redemption of our body.” So while we’re in this flesh. Now, some of us are very happy with the body that we have. Some of us are so happy, we boast about it. Not publicly, of course. But we boast about it. We stand in front of the mirror and we say, “My, I’m really endowed with beauty and handsomeness,” or something like that. But as the years go by, the telltale signs of corruption show, and it’s seen very plainly. If we don’t see it, others see it in us. They see the lines, the wrinkles, the bulges. They see the missing hair and all of the other things that characterize the fact that this body is a body that is in process of corruption, and which will come to its end, when it is placed in a coffin one of these days, unless our Lord should return.

So one of the great hopes of the Christian is not simply that he’s to enter heaven, but he’s to enter heaven with a redeemed body, his body resurrected, a beautiful, glorious body, Scriptures tell us, “Like our Lord’s own glorious body.” So that’s our hope. That’s why there is such a thing as the resurrection of the body, and that’s why it’s important for us to understand that.

Now, the apostle raised in verse 35, two questions. He said, “Someone will say, how are the dead raised up and with what body do they come?” He answered the first question, “How are the dead raised up” in verse 36. “Foolish one. What you sow is not made alive unless it dies.” And so how are the dead raised up? They are raised up normally through the experience of death. Now, “With what body do they come,” he spent verse 37 through verse 39 in explaining what body we are going to rise with. And those verses tell us that.

Now, the apostle made three -- or gave us three descriptions of revelation that he had experienced concerning these things. For example, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 in verse 15, he said that he had received some information by the word of the Lord. It was not in Scripture. It came to him by the word of the Lord. Listen to what he says. This familiar passage, many of you know it, I’m sure, very well. Paul says, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the

Lord will by no means, precede those who are asleep.” “By the word of the Lord.” That’s a revelation. It came to Paul by the word of the Lord. It’s not found in other Scripture. You couldn’t find that in the Old Testament. It came to Paul by the word of the Lord.

Now, he also speaks of a second revelation that came to him. In Romans chapter 11 in verse 25, as he’s speaking about Israel in the plan of God, and their future in verse 25 he says, “For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion that blindness, in part, has happened to Israel until the full number of the Gentiles be come in.” Now, Paul calls that a mystery, a secret. It’s one of those things that in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, he probably was referring to generally when he says, “And though I have the gift of prophesy and understand all mysteries.” So the apostle had access to mysteries that others had not known by direct revelation from the Lord God.

Now, those two could be called revelations that came to Paul. A third one came to Paul also, and it’s described right here in verse 51, “Behold, I tell you (a secret) a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” So here is another of the three. This is the second of the three revelations of life beyond the death, and he gives a fuller description here of how the resurrection will take place. “By the word of the Lord,” he gave information in chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians. “As a mystery,” he gives information concerning the relationship of Israel and the Gentiles and in this present age and the completion of that relationship later. But now, he’s going to give further revelation about the resurrection of the body.

And first of all, he begins by pointing out that there is a prerequisite for resurrection. Verse 50, “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.” We could call this the Law of Transformation; that is, we’re not going to enter heaven as we are. In order to inherit the kingdom of God, there must be a change, a transformation, the Law of Transformation. When he says “flesh and blood,” he means, human nature. We could put it in very simple

language as one of the commentators does, “Life, here and now.” In other words, the life that we live here and now cannot inherit the kingdom of God. It’s a different order of being, a different order of experience. That expression “flesh and blood” is used in a couple of other places in the New Testament in the sense of human nature.

Now, of course, he did not say the body cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The body can inherit the kingdom of God, providing there’s a transformation in the body. So the body is not ruled out. But there must be transformation of the body. We cannot inherit the kingdom of God in this body. But we will be given a body which will be suitable for the inheritance of the kingdom of God and for the enjoyment of eternal life. Isn’t that interesting? Underline it. Eternal life.

The older you get, the more you enjoy the term “eternal” because this life does end. It ends for all of us. You who are young and you who are old. It ends for all of us. Eternal life is one of the great blessings of our heavenly Father, which he has prepared for those who believe in Him.

Now, having pointed out then, the Law of Transformation, he goes on to speak about the changes in verse 51 and following. You remember back in the earlier part of this chapter, the apostle was speaking, and he was speaking about the order of the resurrection. And in verse 23, he had said, “But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits” -- Incidentally, this order is in process of being carried out now because the first step, has already been carried out. In other words, our Lord has come. Notice he says, “each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those *who are* Christ’s at His coming.”

So now he will talk about what transpires when Christ comes, and also he will talk about our experience of it. That’s what he is leading up to when he makes that statement in verse 51. “I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” And of course, remembering that earlier verse, verse 23, “at his coming,” we might say. So, that is expanded. What’s going to happen when Christ comes? It’s a natural question.

But what happens to those who do not die? Well, in order to find the truth about many things in the word of God, it’s necessary for us to learn to read passages and compare them with one another. God does not reveal everything in any one passage we learn from reading the Bible. In fact, a law of interpretation that we compare Scripture with Scripture in order to arrive at truth is one of the fundamental laws of hermeneutics or one of the fundamental laws of interpreting the Bible.

We don’t have all truth given to us concerning particular doctrines in one passage. As far as I know, that’s -- as far as I know, it’s not found in the Bible. There maybe some one exception that doesn’t occur to me at the present moment, but it’s normally, in the understanding of the word of God, the principal and practice of interpreters to compare Scriptures with Scriptures, those that bear own aspects of it, put together, and then the total doctrine is derived from a study of the Scriptures.

1 Thessalonians chapter 4 has to do with the rapture of believers, as well as this particular chapter. But in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul was concerned with those who had died because the Thessalonians evidently had been concerned about that. And they evidently had asked Paul.

The hope of the Lord’s coming is a great hope for us who are living, but what about those who have died? And you remember, the apostle lays stress upon that fact. Because in 1 Thessalonians 4, in this passage that was given to him as a word of the Lord, probably for those Thessalonians, first of all, he had said to them, “For this we say unto you” -- well, I’ll go back and read verse 13 because that’s where his answer to them begins. “I don’t want you to be ignorant, brethren,” -- who wants to be the ignorant brethren? I have a friend who likes to say, “Well there are Plymouth Brethren and there are Grace Brethren and there are Mennonite Brethren and there are ignorant brethren, and I don’t want to be one of that denomination, the ignorant brethren.”

Paul says, “I don’t want you to be ignorant (comma), brethren, (comma) concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

They evidently, were concerned about their loved ones who had already died and wondered if they were going to participate in this marvelous catching up of the body of believers to meet the Lord in the air in their resurrection bodies. And Paul is encouraging them by this revelation that came to him, this word of the Lord, that they were not forgotten in the coming of the Lord. And as a matter of fact, they will rise first. Why would they rise first? Was it just simply special appreciation? Special affection for them? Well, perhaps. Maybe that’s the soundest interpretation.

There was a preacher with a sense of humor who said, “They’ll rise first because they’re six feet farther down.” But we don’t know, it’s evidently the Lord’s special affection for those who did experience physical death and go through the trauma of it. They will be raised first.

So that passage set his attention upon the believers’ loved ones who had died and their participation in the rapture. Incidentally, there’s no question about the rapture. We may have questions about when the rapture takes place. We cannot have any questions about the rapture occurring. It is stated in more than one place as an event to which we look forward. We may have different chronological understanding of things, but we can never rule out rapture. Often here, people say, “Well, I don’t believe in the rapture.” Well, if they say something like that, what they really mean is, “I don’t believe in a pre-tribulational rapture, or I don’t believe in some other aspect of it.” No Christian who believes the Bible can say, “I do not believe in a rapture,” because that’s plainly stated. We may have honest differences of opinion about when, but we all believe in a rapture if we believe the Bible. That’s what the Scriptures mean when it says, “We are caught up to

meet the Lord in the air.” That’s the word, “rapture.” In fact, the Latin translation uses the verb *raptio* from which we get the English word “rapture,” derived from the perfect passive participle of *raptio ratere*, and so forth. And the last of the principle parts is *raptus*. So rapture. Now, Paul was concerned with that in 1 Thessalonians.

Now, he’s concerned here with another aspect of it, primarily. Here, he’s concerned with those who do not die. And that’s before him “Behold, I tell you a mystery (secret.) We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed.” In other words, we are not all going to experience death. But every one of us is going to be changed. Hallelujah for the last clause. We all are going to be changed. And so that’s what Paul is concerned with here, about those. Now, of course, he says things that may apply to both of these groups, but principally here, he’s concerned with those who do not die.

So I come back to my hermeneutical lesson, and it’s this: All questions are not resolved at each related text. This text doesn’t tell us things that 1 Thessalonians tells us. That text doesn’t tell us things that this text says. And both of them maybe enlarged and further explained by other passages. So bear that in mind. When we read the Bible, it’s important that we look at all of the evidence concerning the questions we are discussing.

Now, Paul teaches here, in verse 51 through 54, things concerning the change that is to take place. “I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” Now, he calls this a mystery. The reason he calls it a mystery is, that other Scripture had not revealed the points that are found here. This is -- this is a passage that contains some old teaching but some new teaching that could be called a revelation -- a mystery, he calls it, those secret things that are revealed by the Lord to the apostle at particular points.

He says earlier in the passage I read, that understanding all mysteries involves such things as this, things not revealed previously that are revealed now. This is one of those things.

So now he describes what happens. He says, “We shall be changed.” Now, he’s talking about the body primarily. “We shall be changed.” And then he describes how we’re going to be changed. And notice how he does it. He says, “It’s going to be in a moment.” He told the Thessalonians that the dead were at no disadvantage at his coming and, here, that the dead would have spiritual bodies. That’s what he mentioned in verse 44. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” And here, that further he reveals what happens to the living at his coming. He’s not concerned about the dead being raised first, so they won’t be left out in the rapture, our loved ones have gone on to be with the Lord. They will be involved. They’ll be raised first. Together we’ll meet the Lord in the air, the whole body. But now, he’s talking about what happens to the living in more detail. “We shall be changed.”

Now, this little word “change” is a word that is derived from an adjective that means “another of the same kind.” From which I gather, and other Scriptures support this, that this is not an exchange. In other words, we’re not giving up this for something else. But there is a change of this. Now, I want you to notice how the apostle uses that term here in verse, I believe, 53 and verse 54. Notice the demonstrative adjective “this.” “For this corruptible must put on incorruption.” In other words, it’s not this body is going to be laid aside, but this corruptible body is to be changed. It’s the same body, the same body. We’re not a different body. “For this corruptible must put on incorruption. This mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

So the apostle has underlined again the fact that the body that we have now is the same body that we shall have. But, oh, how different. What a tremendous change. Not an exchange. Not a substitution. But the same body, transformed by the power of an eternal God in heaven. “We shall be changed.” It would be interesting to read some of

the things that have been written about this, but I don’t think we really have time to do this.

Incidentally, some of you may have a Bible with some marginal notes, some, a number of marginal notes. And this particular text has been subject of some textual corruption because it’s found in the manuscripts in different versions. And I don’t want to get off the main track and go into the three or four different ways in which older manuscripts have copied this. This is the product of scides -- that’s a new word. I never heard of that word before, scides -- scribes is what I was trying to say. Scribes are human. They’re just like you. They’re just like me. They make mistakes.

Now, all of you have been to school. Some of you didn’t learn much, but all of you went to school. And you know that when you were in school, you had to copy things. Did you always copy perfectly? No, you didn’t. You made all the common mistakes that you make when you copy. Some of you were copying along, and you looked up at something. You looked back and, instead of copying the next word, you copied the one in the line above or the one below. In fact, some of you went on copying and left out a phrase or two. You could leave out a total line. If one line ended in the word “discovery” and the next line ended in the word “discovery” as is entirely possible, you may have been reading and you came to “discovery,” you wrote “discovery,” you looked up to pick it up again, and you looked at the second, just under it, “discovery,” and began to copy from there and the whole line was left out. All the manuscripts have instances of errors just like that.

So that’s why we have different readings in the manuscript tradition. Some manuscripts read this way. Some read another. They generally follow the same truth. No doctrinal question really is related to this specifically because ultimately, the vast mass of manuscripts that we have means that we have the truth. But we may have to say, “This manuscript is corrupted by the scribe at this point.” But this is probably the reason for

the different readings here. The truth is not affected by it, so we won’t bother any more than that.

Paul says here, “In a moment.” Now, that is a word that comes from -- it’s an adjective actually -- which comes from a word that means “to cut.” So, it’s something that cannot be cut, something that cannot be divided. “In a moment,” in an indivisible moment. Now, what does that mean? That means it’s momentary. There is no lengthy period of time. It’s just like that.

Now, we have ways of dividing time. If you notice basketball games now when they come down near the end, if it’s a close game, you might see 15.3 seconds left. What’s point three of a second? How would you, how would you explain that? Can you say something in point three of a second? Now, a southerner could never do that. He needs more than seconds. He needs sometimes half a minute to say a sentence or two. That’s why the Scots always understood me so well. They used to say to me, “We don’t understand a lot of the Americans that come over, but we understand you.” And I figured it out. It was because I was speaking so slowly that they had time to interpret what I was saying. By the time I got to the next word. So they always like to hear me talk for that reason. Well, this is “in a moment.” It’s momentary. It’s the shortest possible conception of time. It’s indivisible time. “In a moment.”

Now, Paul further says, “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” But it’s not twinkling in the sense of winking. That’s the way the fellow on Friday night, Louis Rukeyser, who gives the Wall Street Report at the end. If you’ll notice, if you listen to him -- turn on at the end of the program, if you want to see this, and he’ll wink at you at the end. I don’t understand what that has to do with stock market except it’s all a joke. At any rate, he always winks. He did his left eye a lot, now he occasionally does the right eye, but he winks at the end. [laughter]

This is not the winking of an eye. This is something even more momentary. It’s the twinkle of an eye. It’s the fluttering of the eyelid. Not even as much time as to wink,

Paul is saying. This is the twinkling of an eye, but we would say the -- there’s something that’s more momentary than twinkling. It’s the flicker of an eyelid. We always say about an individual, if you look carefully and we see who will blink. No, this is even more momentary. Not blink, but just flicker. “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” It’s momentary. No time for Peter to erect a judgment throne in which everybody appears before him and their lives, they tell of their lives, and then Peter will make the final determination. Yes, you qualify. You go this way. No, you don’t. You go that way. No, this is something that is momentary. The flicker of an eyelid, and we’re in the presence of the Lord. How marvelous that is. “In a moment.” In the flicker of an eyelid, he says.

“The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” This statement about the trumpet is interesting. It has some historical significance for me. When I was going through Dallas Seminary, Dr. Norman Harrison, who was on the visiting faculty with H.A. Ironside and some of the other men, was a marvelous devotional speaker, a Presbyterian minister who came every year to the Dallas Seminary to teach the word of God. He’s highly regarded, well liked, a Bible teacher. He’d been a pastor for many years but his latter part of his life, spent traveling around the country, primarily in devotional teaching of the word of God. He was widely respected all over the country. His son was on the faculty of Dallas Seminary, one of my teachers as professor of New Testament, Everett F. Harrison, who later became professor of New Testament at Fuller Seminary in California.

Dr. Norman Harrison, after studying the Scriptures for, well, a lifetime really, near the end of his life came to the conviction that the tribulation of the church was not a pre- - that the rapture of the church was not a pretribulational rapture, but a mid-tribulational rapture. That is, that the church would enter part of the tribulation, and then the rapture would take place when the great tribulation began in the center of the tribulation period. As a result of that, he was asked to leave the faculty of Dallas Seminary because they stood for the pretribulational rapture, and Dr. Harrison taught otherwise. He was not a

teacher who was there constantly, but he did come in every year for these particular lectures.

And one of the bases for Dr. Harrison’s conviction was, that here where it is stated, “The trumpet will sound. The dead will be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed,” was his conviction that this trumpet, the trumpet called in another place, the last trumpet, is the seventh trumpet of the seven trumpet series of the Book of Revelation. And since the seventh trumpet of the Book of Revelation occurs in the middle of the tribulation, it was his conviction that, when we read here, “The trumpet shall sound,” and it’s 1 Thessalonians as I remember that makes the point more specifically, where he says in -- let’s see, verse -- well, I thought it was verse 16. “The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with a voice of an archangel and with a trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise as first.”

Now, there is a passage that has the last trumpet but at any rate, he made the point that this was the point of the rapture of the church. And he was asked to leave the theological faculty. He was a very good friend of Dr. Chafer’s, and Dr. Chafer had to make that decision. So every time I read this and I see, “For the trumpet will sound” -- Now, here is the statement, the last trumpet. “In a moment of the twinkling of an eye, the last trumpet,” I think of Dr. Norman Harrison and the fact that this was the reason why he left the Dallas Theological Seminary faculty.

Now, Paul in verse 54 -- well I should mention verse 53 for you. He says, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality.” In other words, we’re not able to inherit the kingdom of God in mortality or in corruption. So, as he says, “This corruptible must put on incorruption. This mortal must put on immortality.”

So then, in verse 54, “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written,

Death is swallowed up in victory.” And to conclude with verse 55, “O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?”

So, it’s Paul who uses these passages from the Old Testament as a kind of taunt for those who may have questions about the resurrection of the body. He takes these passages from Isaiah 25:8, and Hosea 13:14, cites them rather freely, but taunts death as that last enemy which doesn’t have power over those who believe in Jesus Christ. So, “O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?” Death is swallowed up in the victory of the resurrection of the body by the Lord God in heaven. I like that because it seems to me that’s very true to life. It’s the apostle saying as he throws out a challenge to death, what can you do? The eternal God has determined what is going to come to pass. Where is your victor that you think you have? You have used the law and you have brought us to the knowledge of our sin but the victory is ours, nevertheless.

Now then, that leads Paul to say a word about sin, law, and death. Now I think this is necessary because so many people do not understand this and it’s found in verse 56 and 57. “The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law.” The weapon of death is sin. In fact, it’s as if death has used sin to inflict the wound of death upon us. So the sting of death is sin. The weapon of death is sin. When sin is overcome, death loses it’s terror, of course. That’s what Christ has come to do. So death gains its victory through sin.

Now, how does death bring the knowledge of sin to us? Well, death does it by -- what would you expect? Something evil? No, not something evil. Something good. By that which is holy, just, and good. The law. The law is the means that the devil uses to bring us to the knowledge of our sin.

Now, we don’t have time to turn to -- this is another of those places where, to get the whole truth, we need to turn to other passages. But Romans chapter 6 and especially Romans chapter 7, verse 7 through verse 13 will explain how it is that the law, that which is holy, just, and good, said by Paul to be that, is the means of bringing us to the

knowledge of our sin and the fact that we are spiritually dead. And will die eternally if we do not have redemption.

So the sting of death is sin. The strength of sin is the law. That’s why the law is preached. The law was preached in order to bring men to salvation? No. Legalists think that. But the law could never save anybody because it deals with people who are sinners. We cannot obey the law. We know that, don’t we? Look at those commandments. How many of you have fulfilled them to this point? That’s all right. Go ahead and make your public testimony. We’ll listen to it. How many of you? Look at there. Some of you are just embarrassed to stand up and say that. I know there was a preacher one time who said something like that. He said, “Cannot anyone stand up and say” -- and one fellow finally stood up and he’d say, “I can’t say that, but I’d like to put in a word for my wife’s first husband.” [laughter]

See, what Paul is really saying here is, that the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. We would be of all people most miserable if we should be placed under a works system of salvation because we’d all be lost. All of us. “But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, the Lord Jesus has stolen the victory of death. Well, death thought he had overcome. Our Lord has stolen the victory of death and given us the victory that we lost by reason of our sin. Someone has said this text is no dry, dogmatic gloss. That is, no dry dogmatic explanation of things. Well, that’s true.

Now notice the statement in verse 57. He says, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.”

The first of the three revelations concerning the future that Paul calls a mystery of the word of the Lord concludes with a change. So shall will ever be with the Lord? He said in 1 Thessalonians 4:18. This second revelation answers it -- answers to it with eternal bliss that we have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And, incidentally, this “through our Lord Jesus Christ,” is not simply through our Lord who died on the cross.

But almost always this expression “through Christ” involves the resurrected Christ. So he gives us the victory through our great resurrected Savior.

This, as Moffatt puts it in his commentary, is an anticipation of the deep ecstasy of Romans 8:37, and following where he hints that victory is almost too poor a term for such an experience. He said in Romans 8:37, “Tet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Some magnificent wave of this great chapter on the resurrection to conclude. But verse 58, we move, as you might expect from the apostle, from belief to behavior. “Therefore, (so then, so then) my beloved brethren, be steadfast -- this is the challenge, incidentally, of theology. So then, my beloved brethren, in the light of this mystery, in the light of this truth, which we call theology, discourse concerning God. In the light of that, “be steadfast, immovable. Settled belief in the resurrection leads to immovability. Immovability. That’s a favorite borrowed word of Aristotle the philosopher. So immovability in Christian service.

Now, the Corinthians, particularly, needed that. You’ll read back over the chapters we’ve gone through, and you’ll notice many different ways in which the Corinthians were movable. In fact, this epistle was written because they had moved away, in so many ways, from what Paul had taught them originally. So be immovable in biblical doctrine.

Now, I think I’ve got time to mention this. I have a letter. I just received it a few days ago from a friend in California in whose church I had some meetings last year. And in the course of it -- in the course of the letter, he mentions the Christian movement, Promise Keepers. Now, Promise Keepers is the movement associated with Bill McCartney who was the coach of the Colorado football team. The movement is essentially a movement of the charismatics. He is a Christian man. There are many Christian people

in this movement, and I’m not attacking the movement as a whole. I don’t know enough about it to attack it. I just know what I see and what I’ve heard. But there are many things about it that indicate that the movement is not a movement in which Christian theology plays the place that it should. In other words, there’s deviations from doctrine. There’s a recent book that’s been promoted by them called, “The Masculine Journey.” And as a matter of fact, one of the professors who has endorsed it, among others, is one who lives in this city and has endorsed this book.

Now, in this book occurs this paragraph, “I believe that Jesus was phallic.” Now, you know the *phallus* is the male penis. “With all the inherent phallic passions we experience as men, but it was never recorded that Jesus had sexual relations with women. He may have thought about it as a movie -- as the movie “The Last Temptation of Christ” betrays, but even in this movie, he did not give in to the temptation and remained true to his Messianic course. If temptation means anything, it means Christ was tempted in every way, as we are. That would mean not only heterosexual temptation but also homosexual temptation. I’ve found this insight to be very helpful with gay men struggling with their sexuality.”

I don’t believe that is true. The Scriptures speak very plainly about homosexuality. I don’t think that our Lord had any temptation to be a homosexual. We do have to remember, of course, that all temptation is temptation to turn aside from the will of God. And that was the experience that our Lord had in his own way, the temptation to turn aside from the will of God. What I want to -- what I’m trying to underline is this. It’s important for us to know what the Scriptures say. And that’s what Paul means when he says here, “My beloved brethren, be steadfast, be immovable.” Stick to the things that the Scriptures say. The Bible is our guide: in our minds, in our hearts, in our lives, with our family, with our children, in all the experiences of life. The Corinthians have shown themselves to be weak. He had said back in verse 12 that some of them had doubts about the resurrection. Now as Christ is preached, that he’s been raised from the dead,

how do some among you say there is no resurrection. They needed the truth of immovability.

And he concludes by saying, “Always abounding in the work of the Lord since you know,” that’s the force of the participle, “since you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” If done in the Lord, it must abide just as he abides.

I’m thankful for what God has done in Believer’s Chapel for now, thirty-two or - three years because the aim of the elders in the beginning was to stand immovable on the word of God. Now, we have made mistakes. I’m not one of the elders now and haven’t been for a number of years, but I’m sure they would agree that the leadership has made mistakes, and they’ve tried to correct some of them and will of course, in the future. But we have reason to thank God for the fact that we have tried to be just what Paul says here, “steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord knowing that our labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

And we think of the way in which the assembly, small though it is, has affected this particular city. Over the radio, has affected this area. You would be surprised at some of the questions that I am asked. Recently I was conducting a funeral. As we walked in to the building, one of the men who worked at the funeral home said, “Dr. Johnson, just like to let you know that I listen to you every Sunday morning and some of those men need the gospel. They see every evidence of the fact that we’re sinners and we die. And they, nevertheless, are not believers. They need the gospel, too.” And then of course, the tape ministry that is going out very wide. Important question, I must stop before we’re up is this: Will you participate in that resurrection? May God in his Grace, touch your heart concerning this great truth, and may you respond in the way that the apostle would have you to respond. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for Thy word. We thank Thee for this great truth of the resurrection of the body. We look forward to the body prepared for each of us.

“The Mystery of the Lord’s Coming” by S. Lewis Johnson
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Help us Lord, to be steadfast, immovable, and enable us to abound in the work of the
Lord knowing that such work is not in vain in the Lord.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.