

Victory

Text:

I Corinthians 15: 50-58

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 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 imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Introduction:

When I was eleven or twelve years old I read a book. There was nothing unusual about this as I was a reader, and by that time I had read many books. What sets this book apart in my mind, and the reason I still remember it when most of my childhood reading has been long forgotten, is its ending. I was accustomed to books that followed a familiar pattern. The hero or heroine (sometimes human, sometimes animal) was introduced; they got into a terrible predicament; they got out of the predicament; all ended well and they walked or rode or galloped happily into the sunset. This book was different.

I had reached the age of being obsessed with anything with an internal combustion engine, so its title, *Hot Rod*, immediately caught my eye. The hero of the story obtains what was, at the time, my dream car, a 32 Ford coupe. I don't have a copy of the book, so I couldn't go back and verify all the details, but the story went something like this. He turns his 32 Ford coupe into a hot rod. The one detail I remember is that he painted it pink and gave it copper, instead of chrome, hubcaps. All is going well; he wins a car show, but then on the way home he has an accident and he and his girlfriend are killed. As a twelve year old accustomed to books with happy endings, I wasn't ready for that. I wanted to rewrite the book. I wished I hadn't read it. It haunted me for days, and in the end taught me a valuable lesson. That lesson is: the final

outcome is what counts. Lots of good things had happened to the hero along the way, but at the end of the book he was dead.

This is a parable of life. If there is no final victory then all the little victories along the way become meaningless, but if on the other hand there is a possibility of final victory then all of life's joys, labors, and struggles take on new meaning. This is the point the Apostle Paul is making in our text. We have only read the conclusion, and we must understand that conclusion in light of the entire chapter which is a coherent whole.

I. Victory

He begins the chapter by affirming that he had come to Corinth to communicate to them the good news, not just good news, but the good news; the good news without which everything else that might happen to us as individuals, or to the world as a whole, is in the end without any final meaning. Christians are accustomed to calling that good news the gospel, and Paul defines it precisely in the first eight verses of the chapter in these words:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is the reason why in western literature we are used to stories having a happy ending. When they do they are just following the pattern of the story upon which Christian civilization was founded. Christ came into the world. He was God's Son and he was completely joined to us as humans. He was mistreated, rejected, and finally on Good Friday he was put to death. Had that been the end of the story, we would not be here this morning talking about it. We would not know the name, Jesus of Nazareth. He would not even be a footnote in first century Jewish history. He would be forgotten and everything we know would be radically different from what it is. But the story doesn't end with Good Friday. It doesn't end with defeat. It ends with the victory of Easter, and the victory of Easter is the ultimate victory, because as Paul says in the text we read, it is victory over our ultimate enemy, death.

When you go back to the very beginning of the story to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis this is what you find. God creates humans. He creates them good. He places them in an ideal environment, and he gives them one rule to keep, but they break that rule, and as God had said the consequence of breaking that rule was death. There is a powerful witness to this in the Bible's first genealogy in Genesis chapter 5 which begins with Adam and goes to Noah. Like most genealogies it follows a set pattern. A person is born, or in the case of Adam, he is created. He lives a certain number of years and begins to beget sons and daughters. He lives a total number of years, and he dies. Even though the life spans are much longer than we are accustomed to, up to 969 years in the case of Methuselah, they always end the same words: "and he died". So humanity's great enemy is established. It is death. But even in this chapter there is a ray of hope. Of one person, Enoch, it is said: "he walked with God: and was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:21). Throughout the Old Testament this ray of hope doesn't go away, but neither is it fully affirmed. Job sums it up with a question: "If a man die, shall he live *again*? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come" (Job 14:14). The hope is there but the hopeful are waiting. This is the way the Old Testament ends. It is a promise awaiting fulfillment. To read it without its sequel the New Testament would leave one disturbed and questioning, but there is a sequel, and the sequel is about victory. This is why that in Paul's definition of the good news that we read the phrase "according to the Scriptures" occurs two times. All of those promises that God made over the long period from Adam to Christ have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is the reason he says in another passage: "For all the promises of God in him *are* yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (II Corinthians 1:20).

I would add to this that Paul insists that the victory of Easter is attested. The story is true. You can base your life upon it. There were witnesses. On Easter morning the tomb was empty. Christ was alive. He had faced death and conquered it; and more than that he conquered it for us as well. This is what he means when he says in the text: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ."

II. Living in Light of Christ's Victory

Notice how the passage ends. It ends with an encouragement to live your life to the fullest, to be "steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." The reason for this is that "our labor in the Lord is not in vain." The "vain" in the conclusion must be read in light of a series of "vains" earlier in the passage where he describes a world without Easter. This is what he says:

And if Christ be not risen, then *is* our preaching vain, and your faith *is* also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith *is* vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept” (I Corinthians 15:14-20).

Remember what I said at the beginning: “If there is no final ultimate victory then all the little victories along the way become meaningless, but if on the other hand there is a possibility of final victory then all of life’s joys, labors, and struggles take on new meaning.”

Our ultimate victory is assured by Christ’s victory over death. Therefore all that we do now that is “in the Lord”, that is, that flows from, that is motivated by the new reality that we know in him somehow has eternal and permanent significance. The joy of Easter should infiltrate even the simplest tasks. Don’t waste your life by living with selfish and petty motivations. Live the life that God has given you to the fullest by living it fully for Jesus Christ who told us that “even a cup of cold water given in his name will not lose its reward.” Life may be difficult, but it is not vain. We may labor, but we can do it joyfully, because when we do it in Christ the final outcome will be victory.