

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

1 Cor 15:50 *Now this is what I am saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.* 51 *Listen, I will tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—* 52 *in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* 53 *For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.* 54 *Now when this perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will happen,*

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” 55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

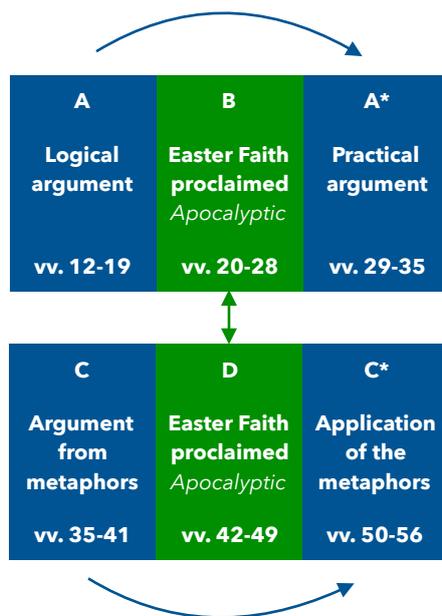
56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! 58 So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. .

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Nothing is more central to Pauline teaching than the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, a resurrection which includes ours as well, as a kind of first fruits. The lectionary tends to privilege brevity (perhaps a good thing!) but the verses chosen for today make little sense independently of the omitted opening verses 50-53.

KIND OF WRITING

The structure in colour can help us see what is happening here. Vv. 50-56 (C*) in some way correspond to vv. 35-41 (C). V. 55 brings that argument to an emotional conclusion by means of an exclamation. The final v. 56 furnishes a very brief peroration or synthesis, taking us back to the very start of the discussion in v. 1: *Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel that I preached to you, that you received and on which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.* (1 Cor 15:1-2) Finally, although Paul has argument logically in A, A* and C, and inserted apocalyptic reflections in B and D, nevertheless, the final application of the teaching and insights is presented once more in the



language of apocalyptic. In other words, Paul is using the language of faith to describe faith.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

At this point, Paul arrives at the climax of his persuasion. He had first argued logically: to say there is no resurrection *at all* would undercut the whole Gospel project. Then, he argued metaphorically to show that “body” can mean more than one thing and he even spoke of a spiritual body. Having thus opened up their minds, he applied these insights to the concrete case of how we are to imagine the dead rising. This is of its nature beyond description—but Paul has a shot at it before giving up (“I will tell you a mystery”).

RELATED PASSAGES

For we know that if our earthly house, the tent we live in, is dismantled, we have a building from God, a house not built by human hands, that is eternal in the heavens. For in this earthly house we groan, because we desire to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed, after we have put on our heavenly house, we will not be found naked. For we groan while we are in this tent, since we are weighed down, because we do not want to be unclothed, but clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Cor 5:1-4)

For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely

not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be suddenly caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:15-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 50 Paul is not contrasting the material and the spiritual but rather saying that our whole being will be transformed. The dead are still, somehow, embodied.

Verse 51 Mystery suggests some kind of revelation (lit. apocalypse). Sleep means to die. As in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul thinks some will be still alive when the Lord returns.

Verse 52 The language returns to pure apocalyptic because Paul continues to make faith claims rather than rational arguments.

Verse 53 Notice “puts on” rather that is replaced by.

Verse 54-55 Paul allows himself a cry of triumph, using allusions to Isaiah 25:8 (LXX) and Hosea 13:14.

Verse 56 “Sting” comes from Hosea 13:14. The writing is compressed: sin communicated death and, worse, sin had been able to manipulate of the Torah (NB: Rom 5:12-21; 7:7-25). Salvation in Christ liberates us from the power of all three: sin, death and the Law.

Verse 57 An emotional concluding exclamation.

Verse 58 A final appeal which takes us back to the opening verses as well as to the logical argument in vv. 12-19.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The great transformation to come has already begun for us — how do I see it unfolding in my own life?
2. Do I feel the same sense of exultant gratitude, so much part of Paul’s spirituality?

PRAYER

God of the living: for you, all are alive and so we place our faith in Jesus, the first born from the dead, the ground of our hope and the pledge of future life.