

What's the Message – Lesson 128

In today's lesson St. Paul enlightens us about the resurrection from the dead.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our opening today is a verse from another of our favorite hymns: “Lord, by the stripes which wounded Thee, from death's dread sting thy servants free, that we may live and sing to Thee. Alleluia!” Amen.

The text of that hymn refers to us living an eternal life with our Lord, and eternal life is the subject Paul speaks to us about in today's lesson. But it was not just the people in Corinth who had questions on this subject. Paul had previously written to the small church in Thessalonica in response to questions they had. They were greatly concerned about family and friends who had died before the return of Jesus. In chapter 4 of his first letter to them, beginning at verse 13, Paul wrote:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. . . . For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

As for when Jesus will come again, he reminded them that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” It was not for them to know, nor was it something for them – or us – to be concerned about. Just be ready. But the Gentiles in Corinth had more questions, and doubts, about this radical idea of a human body rising from the dead. And there were some in Corinth who insisted that such an idea was beyond reason, and should be discarded as preposterous. So Paul wrote the comforting chapter 15 of 1st Corinthians, and told them:

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. . . .

Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me. . . . Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Now Paul hammers home his point: *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming, those who belong to Christ.*

And now Paul moves to the next question. He says: *But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"* And he answers, with a touch of exasperation:

You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as He has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. . . . There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

And now Paul gives us his conclusion, the final point of his message to us: *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.

Notice that Paul says this victory – eternal life – is something given to us. It is certainly not something that we deserve, or can earn. So why did God do this? Remember what Jesus taught Nicodemus (Jn. 3:16-18). It is God’s way of doing things. It is the way of love.

Next time we will begin our study of Paul’s guidance for the church at Ephesus.