

# “O Death, Where Is Your Sting?”

*1 Corinthians 15:55-57*

Rev. Min Chung

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<sup>55</sup> “O death, where is your victory?

*O death, where is your sting?”*

<sup>56</sup> *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* <sup>57</sup> *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

## **Introduction**

1 Corinthians 15 is a glorious chapter on resurrection. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to a church that had a lot of problems and difficulties. They were powerful yet so filled with sin and internal conflict and fights. 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 are about the gifts of the Holy Spirit as people with different gifts were arguing about what gift is greater. Therefore, Paul talks about love in 1 Corinthians 13. After that, he follows up with 1 Corinthians 15, answering some of the questions people had in regards to heresy and wrong doctrine about resurrection and resolves the issues related to resurrection.

Since we are only looking at a few verses, this is an outline of 5 things in order to compartmentalize the context of the whole chapter:

1. Historical foundation of resurrection [1-11] – How do you know?  
Paul is saying to look at the history and what had happened and to look at the witnesses.
2. Implications of no resurrection [12-19] – What if there is no resurrection?
3. Implications of resurrection [20-34] – What does it mean?
4. Explanation of resurrection [35-50] – What happens to us?
5. Hope of resurrection [51-58] – How should we live?  
How should we live then in light of this resurrection? What is the reality of resurrection?

We see an important part in the few verses as they relate to the hope of resurrection. We’ll break up these verses into 4 parts to see how we ought to live in light of this incredible truth and reality of resurrection.

## **I. O death, where is your victory? [55a]**

*1 Corinthians 15:55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”*

Through this verse, Paul is saying because of the reality of the resurrection, Jesus Christ has defeated death. He is personifying death and trash-talking at death in a sense by saying ‘death, you, where is your victory?’ since Christ had overcome death. However, we can still ask the question: how is the resurrection true? Paul talks about it in verses 4-8:

*1 Corinthians 15:4-8 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

In verse 6, Paul refers to “fallen asleep” as those who are dead.

Paul argues and verifies the facts of resurrection through eyewitnesses who had seen the resurrected body of Christ mentioned in verses 4-8 as well as the other following components:

#### **A. Buried in Joseph’s tomb**

According to both Biblical, gospel accounts and accounts outside of the Bible, we know that Jesus was buried in Joseph’s tomb. Joseph was a famous Pharisee and a Sanhedrin member; Sanhedrin was the top religious and political group. There were only 70 Sanhedrin members so as one of them, Joseph was known as a famous politician and famous religious leader among the Jews. Therefore, if Joseph were to proclaim anything about Jesus, he would have lost everything because the Jews did not like Jesus. They were among the people who killed Jesus and Joseph Arimathea knew that coming out and claiming the body of Jesus so he could be put in his tomb would mean that he would lose everything. But that’s what Joseph does. He comes out and asks for the body of Jesus Christ and he puts him in his tomb. It was a well-known fact that Jesus, the King who owned everything, was buried in a borrowed tomb of a famous politician.

#### **B. Raised from the dead / the tomb had to be empty**

In verse 4, it says Jesus was raised from the dead. While Christians believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, not everybody at that time agreed with this. However, other people at least acknowledged that the body was missing and the tomb was empty. Everybody knew Jesus because he was seen as a national prisoner. Because his body was missing, people felt compelled to say something, so they started making the excuse that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. Their theory was that these coward disciples who had locked themselves in a small room out of fear of the Jews and who had run away when Jesus was crucified had somehow went against the Roman soldiers to steal Jesus’ body. They claimed that the disciples had somehow gotten into a sealed tomb, even though it was guarded with high security by the Roman soldiers who were fighting machines at the time. So while there was disagreement about if Jesus rose from the dead, Paul is simply stating that the tomb being empty and the body going missing was something everyone knew about and could agree on.

#### **C. Appeared to Cephas**

Cephas refers to Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times. After his denial, he was restored and became a respected leader very close to Jesus, who followed Jesus for three-and-a-half years. Peter, too, said that he saw Jesus.

#### **D. The twelve**

Jesus also appeared to the twelve. The twelve here refers to the twelve immediate disciples of Jesus Christ (which may or may not exclude or include Judas and Peter) that were predominantly responsible for the writing of the New Testament. When the disciples were together the first Sunday to celebrate the resurrection (and why we also worship on Sunday), Thomas was not there. Thomas was a logical, scientific guy who needed to see the evidence. Since he wasn't there the first time, he didn't believe the others had seen Jesus. The second time though, Thomas was there and Jesus Christ appeared again. He said to Thomas to touch his body and his pierced hands. We don't know if Thomas physically touched or not, but he started to believe regardless during that second time Jesus appeared to the twelve. Therefore, we know that Jesus appeared at least twice before the disciples, probably more.

#### **E. Five hundred brothers at one time**

It's important to note here '*at one time*'. It wasn't that Jesus appeared to 500 brothers everywhere, but in one place, at one time, on one occasion. Even if one person had been dreaming or half-asleep, it wouldn't be possible for 500 people to all claim they had seen Jesus unless it actually happened. 1 Corinthians 15:6 says many of these 500 brothers are still alive. 1 Corinthians was written 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus. If people had doubts about Jesus' resurrection, they could verify this fact with the brothers who were now scattered everywhere. Paul constantly talked about the eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus as he preached so people could have others to go to and confirm what he had written. If it were made up, there would not be hundreds of people who are willing to endure hardships, suffering, and persecution, to preach what they know they have seen as the resurrection of the risen Lord.

#### **F. James the brother of Jesus**

James is the younger half-brother of Jesus. Though we don't know how much younger he was than Jesus, he spent close to 30 years growing up with Jesus. James could have had a lot of childhood experiences (good or bad) with Jesus but he still grew up to be the leader of the Jerusalem church. This movement claimed his own brother to be the Messiah of the world and Son of God, but he became a believer and leader of this movement. Paul mentions James to bring about the questions: How likely is that? Is it really a lie? Is it really a cult? Could Christianity really be founded on something that had not happened? Paul is giving evidence after evidence of eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord, including James.

#### **G. Paul, famous killer of Christians turned missionary**

Paul himself saw Jesus, as it says "as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me". Jesus appeared to Paul after he had resurrected and ascended into heaven. While Paul was

persecuting the church, in Acts 9, Jesus appears to Paul on his way to Damascus. Paul sees the light and Jesus speaks to him and Paul becomes Christian.

Paul learned from one of the greatest historical intellects named Gamaliel. So Paul was highly educated for his time. He was the man who had everything: intellect, status, power, etc. and the most zealous killer of Christians. But one day, Paul decides to throw away all of his social standings, reputation, authority, and wealth, for Jesus. He traveled thousands of brutal miles by foot and subjected himself to lashings, beatings to the brink of death, stonings, shipwrecks, starvation, dehydration, and years of imprisonment, so he could tell people of Jesus who had died and resurrected, after he himself had seen the truth of the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Paul received the amazing grace of the resurrected Lord.

#### **H. The twelve, how they lived and died after**

Lastly, this is how the 12 disciples lived and died after they had seen the resurrected Lord. They died while preaching about him until the end. The disciples were cowards who ran when Jesus was captured and locked themselves in a room in fear of the Jews. But then, they suddenly became courageous to proclaim not only the Messiah who died but also to claim that the Messiah had risen from the dead. When you trace the historical background of what happened to some of these disciples... would they have died for what they had not seen? They say that Peter died by crucifixion, upside-down; James—executed by the sword; Thomas—speared to death; Matthew—speared to death; Philip—tortured and crucified upside-down; Bartholomew—skinned alive and crucified upside-down; Andrew, James, Thaddeus, and Simon—all crucified. There are two things in common about these men: first, they claim that they have seen the resurrected Lord, and second, they proclaim the message of Jesus, not only his death, but his resurrection.

So if by chance you are ministering to anyone who does not believe, I would say, you have to establish the credibility of the Bible first. I would challenge you to look into some books and other resources to check the historicity of Christianity and the Bible. There is no other religion that has such an incredible historical background. You'll find that it is incredible how much historical background is in alignment with the Bible and Christianity. So, if they start to have respect for the recordings of the Bible as history, even if they don't agree with everything in it, then study the Bible together, talk from the Bible, and help them to personally read the Bible so that they can receive the power of God and start to have faith in their hearts.

The ones who have seen the resurrected Lord wrote about it in large portions of the Bible in the New Testament and were very confident about the facts and evidence, just like Paul is showing in this chapter. There has to be trust there that God appeared to them so they could write these things. So is Christianity just a symbol or history with power? Is it just an event in history or power that came outside of history in history? The doctrine of resurrection is good because it's not just an optimistic pile of stories but it's the power of God that actually happened in history. Each and every one of us needs to shed facts as we know it about the world history as well as our personal history. If Christ is raised, history

is changed. And your personal history, your personal life is changed. No wonder through these people, the first century and the whole world changed because they died spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why we can say "O death, where is your victory?" because Jesus Christ has won. Nothing can stop death. Everything dies. Except Jesus. Death could not hold him down. Jesus did not only defy death or deny death but destroyed death. He has beaten death for you.

## II. O death, where is your sting? [55b]

*1 Corinthians 15:55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

This sound similar to the first phrase but it's slightly different. The first point talks about death and the second point talks about the pain that comes because of death—sting. I think the world doesn't know what to do with the concept of death. They deny the pain of death and avoid and downplay it because they don't really want to talk about it. A lot of times cemeteries have walls. But what are they worried about? Are they worried that these bodies will walk out? They put the walls so the living will not see what is inside, so that we will not have to think about death. Death is a taboo topic. A hundred years ago or so, people would die in their house on their bed and then family members would bury them. Back then, sex was a taboo topic. Sex was pornographic and death was not, but now we live in a world where death is pornographic and sex is not.

One author said: Can you imagine driving without windows? You wouldn't be able to see outside! Our modern society lives in a world without windows. We can't see what's outside of our world and what's outside of our life. We now live in a world without windows because people refuse to talk about what's after this life. What happens when we die? People don't want to think about it. No one can die without fear because there is uncertainty. Epicurus said that fear of death is not that there is annihilation, in which we would stop existing, but the possibility that there isn't annihilation. That maybe you continue to exist but you don't really know what's going to happen. We beautify death even when people die and make them look good to downplay what happens after we die. When we know Jesus, we can face death knowing exactly what's going to happen afterwards. We can tease death because there is a realm where everything becomes new because Christ died for us. The underlying thought behind a new diet is the desire for a new body, the underlying thought for wanting new make-up is the desire for new skin. There is hunger for newness, hunger to improve and to be better because everything else is decaying.

*Romans 8:11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

In essence, this verse is saying that power that raised Jesus from the dead is inside of us. There is spiritual resurrection that has occurred in us through the Spirit. We can be alive in our hearts because of the resurrection power which has raised us to life. And then one day, that same resurrection power that raised us to life spiritually will also raise our physical, mortal bodies. It will be like how after Jesus Christ resurrected when people sometimes could not recognize him at first but then would recognize him after a while. When we are resurrected, we won't lose our individuality, we will recognize one another. Yet there will be a totally different aspect of us. This different aspect can be explained like this: A rock is dead; it cannot have awareness of its surroundings. Plants are more alive to reality as opposed to a rock. Animals have higher awareness of reality. For example, animals can sense danger and run away, whereas plants cannot do anything. However, human beings are an even higher order of life than animals because we have the highest capacity of awareness to be able to recognize the incredible reality of God when we are resurrected. If you are truly alive, you will be more aware of your sin but incredibly more aware of the grace of God. This means although we are sown in weakness right now, we will be raised in power. We only have five senses now, but there is a possibility that we will have even more senses in heaven so we can be more and more aware of His greatness yet since He is infinite, there will always be more and more to continuously know about Him. Just picturing the reality of the infinite greatness of God makes us seem like a vegetable compared to what we will be in heaven. CS Lewis says if we were to see what we will become, we might be tempted to worship who we will become because we will be so glorious in Jesus Christ. There are so many bad things in the universe and because of sin, everything is decaying and dying. There's spiritual death—a guilty conscience in our hearts. There's physical death. There's a pain in losing loved ones. Slowly but surely, all the stings related to death are going to vanish. Though we will all most likely face death unless Jesus returns, we don't have to fear the sting of death because of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can say to death and pain and hardships and difficulties in life, "Hurt me, you just grow me. Kill me, you just make me."

### **III. The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law [56]**

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

#### **A. The sting of death is sin**

This means the cause of pain of death is sin. In Genesis, we can see the consequence of sin through Adam.

*Genesis 3:17-19 And to Adam he said "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

*19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

Because of sin, death entered into this world. God instituted death. We complain and ask why God? But death is actually an act of God's grace because at that moment when we sinned, we should have immediately been in Hell and condemned to eternal death. Instead, God instituted temporary physical death so that as we slowly become weaker and sicker, we will be faced with that fear of eternal death and find the grace of God through it. When we see the reality of death, we can go to God for grace and mercy in Jesus Christ to overcome death and its sting. Whenever you see death, you're supposed to be in fear and worry but in a good way so that we'll put our faith in Jesus Christ and come to know the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

#### **B. The power of sin is the law**

*Genesis 3:17 And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;*

God ordained power in sin so that we will obey. Adam and Eve did not follow the law to not eat from the tree. Through the law, God shows his ordained power so that when they disobeyed, there would be difficulties and hardships and they would see that and come to know the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The law of God helps us to see our sin. God wants us to fear sin and not disobey, and even when do sin to come back in repentance to the Lord. How did Jesus overcome? Jesus cancelled all of Adam's sin and our sins by dying for us on the cross. Though neither Adam nor any of us could obey, Jesus fulfilled all the righteousness through accomplishing perfect obedience. He perfectly obeyed so that when we put our faith in him. His victory is our victory.

#### **IV. The victory through our Lord Jesus Christ [57]**

This helps us see how we should live out through this victory. We don't have to fight for victory but we fight from his victory.

*1 Corinthians 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

It is God who gives us this victory. God gives us this power through something Christ has done.

## **A. Perceive the power**

There are four resurrections that are written in the Bible so that we can see what kind of power God gives us and perceive the power.

*1 Corinthians 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

### **1) The foundational resurrection of Jesus**

Jesus Christ died and resurrected. That's our foundation. That's what he has done so that we can be saved, forgiven, and receive his strength.

### **2) The spiritual resurrection of our heart**

When we put our faith in him, the second resurrection occurs and we are spiritually resurrected in our hearts. When we struggle with sin, he not only forgives but helps us to fight sin. The sign of a Christian is not one who does not sin, but rather one who fights sin, who is aware of sin, and is constantly fighting and therefore growing.

### **3) The temporary resurrection of Lazarus**

It is a temporary resurrection because Lazarus dies again. Jesus does it to preview the final resurrection that is coming. He wants to show the resurrection power so that we can put our faith and trust in him. He shows power over sickness that's coming when someday we will completely be healed in the final resurrection. He's going to raise us from death eternally. The separation from our loved ones because of death will end up in reunion with the spiritually resurrected people. Jesus is previewing all of this through his temporary resurrection power.

### **4) The final resurrection of everyone and the universe**

The final resurrection of everyone will result in reward for believers and judgment for unbelievers. All the injustice that you see will one day be accounted for. This universe filled with and affected by sin will be cured of the disease of sin. Romans 8 talks about how the whole creation is groaning until the final resurrection. He is constantly giving us spiritual power in our hearts so that we ourselves can grow and raise Lazarus's. It won't be like the physical resurrection of Lazarus that we see in the Bible but the spiritual resurrection of people that are dead around us. We can do ministry by showing off Jesus in our lives through the resurrection power we receive in him.

## **B. Proclaim the victory**

*1 Corinthians 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*

This word “proclaim”—it’s not just public proclaiming, but it means, herald, crier. Back then, when there was great news, they put it on a billboard and someone would cry out so that everyone could hear it.

There are the journalism terms of “hard news” and “soft news”. Hard news are the significant, historical events that affect everybody. Soft news pertain to more of a personal impact. Hard news would be big things that happened like who became president or that there’s a war going on or a disease spreading. Soft news would be smaller things like how to lose weight, entertainment, art, lifestyle, etc. In those days, only hard news existed because it would be what they see on the billboard and it would affect everybody.

When Paul says that you need to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is the hard news. It is something that happened in history that will affect everything. And unless you listen, your life will be tremendously affected or not affected for your eternity’s sake. First-century Christians were so impactful. Even though they were weak and slaves, they were so generous, hopeful, courageous, loving to others, and praised God even to death because God had become a part of their history and news life.

Many people come to church nowadays wanting to hear soft news. They think things like, “Can you make sure I don’t worry today? I have so much fear. Can you take care of my problems?” But the message of the gospel is a hard news. If Christ is raised from the dead, whatever your problem is, what’s the problem? If we understand that Christ is raised from the dead and we have that power of resurrection, then we can say to death: the lower you lay me, the higher you raise me. We must continue to proclaim the message to become prevailing messengers for the glory of God.

### **C. Persevere in gratitude**

*1 Corinthians 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Continuously persevere in your life. Some of us are going through hard times and tragedy, or we know someone else who is. How can we go through these difficulties or help someone else through them?

There is a testimony of a woman named Camille Cates. She is the youth division director of Healing Hearts Ministries. She went through some rough childhood and teenage life but then she came to know the Lord and became a counselor. In her testimony, she talked about holding her dying mother’s hand and how it felt to see her go. After this, Camille reflects: “The death of a parent was harder than I’ve ever

imagined. Yet losing a child to death's grip was unfathomable. Barely an adult, I sat in a sterile hospital room holding my one-year-old daughter's bruised little body after the doctors had informed me that she had been sexually assaulted and shaken until brain dead. The perpetrator was my boyfriend. He wasn't her biological father. The decision was made to take her off life support which was merely keeping her heart beating and lungs breathing. Tears streamed down my face as I watched her chest stop moving. I heard the final flat line on the monitor. My little girl was gone. Where was death's sting? It was right there in my arms where life had been only seconds before." She continues with how she counselled herself through that time and ends with, "You and I will continue to face the effects of sin as long as we live on this fallen earth. Because of our King's resurrection however, we are more than conquerors. The funeral we've all been waiting for, the funeral of death is coming. In the meantime we can choose to hope, to rejoice and through the victory shout, 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'"

## **Conclusion**

How should we deal with death and tragedies like this? We can learn from Jesus. Jesus was at a funeral of a friend named Lazarus and Lazarus' two sisters were side by side, weeping. What does Jesus do? Jesus weeps with them, the shortest verse in the Bible, and only two words.

*John 11:35 Jesus wept.*

Jesus weeps with them but then he raises Lazarus from death a minute later. Why would Jesus cry if he knew he would raise Lazarus shortly after? We know that a thousand years is like one day and one day is like a thousand years to God. The Savior Jesus Christ became one of us and sympathizes and cries with us and understands. He cries with the ones who are facing death. Jesus weeps because he is probably thinking about not only the funeral of Lazarus but the many funerals to come, even his own funeral. Then, when he raises Lazarus, he is probably thinking about the end of all funerals one day, when all the bodies will rise.

So we can learn from Jesus. We can cry, but we must cry with hope through all the hardships and difficulties in life. Our whole life, in the perspective of eternity, is just a little while.

Many people ask questions about what happens to Camille's baby (from the testimony earlier in the sermon)? Even after decades of research, I don't know. I don't think the Bible is clear on this issue. I'm leaning towards we will probably see all the babies in Heaven, even though I cannot prove it through the Bible. But one thing we know is that on the Judgment Day, when God decides everything, we will all say: *Perfect. Fair.* No one will say: *Unjust.* When we see things on the Judgment Day, whatever He does will be perfectly just.

Whether you are Christian or not, all of us will cry in this lifetime. But for Christians, we never have to cry without hope. There is a difference between first-century Christians and second-century Christians. The first-century Christians still cried, but with hope. That's why they were

so courageous and not fearful of death. They were laughing at death and they were gladly accepting death. They were praising God while they were burning on the torch. People were becoming Christians after looking at how they were dying. On the other hand, second century Christians cry in fear. But we have to learn to cry in hope and help others to do the same. We do not need to fear the sting of death because 2000 years ago, there was a man who died between two thieves. We call him our Savior and he was the third thief that day who robbed death of its sting. One day there will be a funeral of death and death of funerals. There will be no more funerals. He will return as a grave robber who will lead us home. Let the divine thief steal your heart.