

PREFACE

Sidebar: Before we get into these final verses of Chapter Fifteen let me take just a moment to address the small issue raised last week regarding a “new name” for believers on a “stone.” And for no extra charge I will include the warning that *all of us* (myself included) should be cautious about declaring any interpretation—or worse, assumption—as absolute—especially anything from the Revelation, and especially found in its often bizarre prophecies. The verse referred to is Revelation 2:17, in the letter to Pergamum.

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

There is a rather long list of conjectures by biblical scholars on just what is represented by the “white stone”; and those same respected, biblical scholars are divided—pretty much down the middle—on whether the “new name” refers to a new name for the Christian individual, or the secret name for Christ; in Revelation 3:12 Christ refers to “My new name.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:53-58.

v55

O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?

When he cites “death” in vv54b-55, the apostle Paul is not speaking of the grave, but of Christ’s ultimate victory over death and Satan.

Gordon Fee: This taunt is Paul’s way of looking forward to the triumph of the ages. Death’s victory has been overcome by Christ’s victory; and death’s deadly sting has been detoxicated—indeed the stinger itself has been plucked—through Christ’s resurrection. Death, therefore, is “powerless over the dead” (C. Holladay); God’s people will be raised and changed into the likeness of the risen and ever-living Christ Himself.

Note that even though Paul is referencing something yet future, the text is in the *present* tense. The wheels of the Eschaton are already in motion; it is one of the more fascinating aspects of the Last Things—the final act of the Eschaton—that events played out there invariably harken back to, and once and for all times fulfill, partial manifestations in history. As Holladay writes, “Death is also powerless over the living.” For the follower of Christ, that is true now. There will come a day when the power and “sting” of death will be removed for all time. Those not in Christ will share its abode in the lake of fire.

The word translated sting can mean a goad or, say, the non-lethal sting of a wasp, but here it refers to the lethal sting of death. Death's sting used to be lethal; now, as of Christ's resurrection, it is not. I like how David Garland puts it.

Garland: [Its stinger] enables death to exercise its dominion over the entire world, but its venom has been absorbed by Christ and drained of its potency so that the victory over death now belongs to God and to God's people, who benefit from it.

That is an excellent word picture. Death aimed its lethal stinger at us, but Christ Jesus intervened and took the hit for us. This selfless act not only saved us, but rendered that stinger utterly impotent, no worse than the nibble of a tiny sweat bee.

v56

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;

I confess that initially I was a bit mystified by this remark—especially the second part. One reason for my confusion even with both parts is that I can read each of these phrases in either direction.

The sting of death is sin,

For example, the customary way to understand “The sting of death is sin” is that “sin is the deadly poison that has led to death” (Fee). Thus our justification in Christ removes the penalty of our sin and, by extension, our “death” because of it. The sting is rendered impotent. In v55, however, death is “personified,” as it is in Revelation 20:14, stating that sin is the poison (from “the sting”) coming *from* death itself. There is a circular, cyclical aspect to this. Death can be seen as both the agent by which we sin, and the entity that benefits *by* our sin. In this, death becomes effectively synonymous with Satan.

Paul has been alluding to and working up to this statement since the beginning of this chapter (v3). The thought is fully developed in his letter to the Romans—which post-dates this letter—but long before the Romans letter this was an essential part of Paul's theology (see Galatians).

and the power of sin is the law;

Here it will help to read some of what Paul wrote to the Romans. And once again we detect a somewhat circular aspect.

Read Romans 5:12-13.

Since Adam, sin has always been present and active on this earth. Because sin was here, death was here, and because all men sinned, all men died. There was sin in the world before there was the Law, but sin was not then *transgression*, because there was no Law to transgress against.

Read Romans 7:7-13.

Garland: The Law, not only unable to arrest sin, spurs it on and pronounces death as its sentence... The Law brings awareness of sinfulness, provokes impulses to sin, which then become deliberate transgressions, with the result that death tightens its stranglehold. The Law cannot give life or impart righteousness, but brings only condemnation.

Fee: Paul's point in this theological aside is that death is not simply the result of decay through normal human processes. Rather, it is the result of the deadly poison, sin itself, which became all the more energized in our lives through acquaintance with the Law.

The circular aspect is demonstrated in that the Law both defines and encourages sin: the Law tells us that we have sinned, and, having sinned, we run back to the Law—and the cycle begins again. We can't help but see the similarity between this and Paul's emotional lament in Romans 7.

For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. (vv15-16)

For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. (v19)

Which leads to his conclusion and wailing lament, beginning in v21.

Read Romans 7:21-24.

His solution to this quandary?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Which sounds very much like his solution in v57 of Chapter Fifteen.

v57

but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is the bookend to how Paul opened this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3.

The KJVs interpret this statement as "first" in a *temporal* sense—i.e., "first of all," first *in time* before anything else. All of our other versions render this as "first" because it is the most important. **(Both can be true.)** God has accomplished this for man through the sacrifice of His Son—or, perhaps better, Christ has accomplished this for man *on behalf of* Father God, to whom we give the thanks.

I think it can be particularly true, in those of us who came to Christ at an early age, and have heard this reinforced all our lives, that the truly mind-boggling wonder of this can have been blunted. Except for those alive when Christ returns, all people will experience the first death, just as they have experienced sin in their lives. A loving God sent His Son—effectively, the Father sent Himself—“to take the bullet” for our sin. As a result, the power of sin in our lives has been removed; it no longer holds dominion over us. And thus, no one in Christ will experience the *second* death, the lake of fire.

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8; emphasis added)

Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6; emphasis added)

v58

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

If v57 is the closing bookend to v3, then v58 is the closing bookend to w1-2 of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-2.

Here the apostle addresses the same people he has scolded and castigated for the previous fourteen chapters as “my beloved brothers [and sisters]”—that is, those from the same womb, from the same divine parent.

So what are you going to do with all this I have just told you, the apostle implicitly inquires of this church. How will this be worked out in your lives? Just as I said at the beginning of this section, you are to stand fast in Christ, and hold fast to His gospel. In addition, you are to super-abound in your service for His name, because all that I have said affirms that in His resurrection we have the assurance of our own resurrection from the dead, and thus our eternity with Him in glory.

Fee: Our present existence in Christ, and our present labors, are not in vain. Standing beneath them is the sure word of Christ’s own triumph over death, which guarantees that we shall likewise conquer. Victory in the present begins when one can, with Paul, sing the taunt of death even now, in light of Christ’s resurrection, knowing that death’s doom is “already/not yet.” Because “death could not hold its prey, Jesus our Savior,” neither will it be able to hold its further prey when the final eschatological trumpet is blown that summons the Christian dead unto the resurrection and immortality. What a hope is this.