

“There’s No Such Thing as the Grateful Dead” 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Introduction

- By the time I turned sixteen I had saved enough money to buy my first car—\$1,400 for a 1976 Fiat Spider convertible. It had a wood dashboard and a wood steering wheel, sheepskin seat cushions and 46,000 miles. And most importantly it had classic Italian Pininfarina lines. Later I added Roosevelt mag wheels and a new soft-top. What a great first car. I miss that car.
- But learning how to drive it? That was another matter. I’ll never forget me and my dad on some secluded street trying to learn how to drive a stick. The lurching. The lunging. The stalls. The whiplash. But then you figure it out and it’s glorious. Then you just want to drive. You cruise. My favorite gear in that tiny little car was fourth gear. First gear was so short it was almost good for nothing. Second, it was okay. Third was the climbing gear. But fourth? Fourth gear was the sweet spot. It had the most power and it was so silky smooth. It’s like the car wanted to get there as fast as it could and stay there. Even though the car had a fifth gear, most of my driving was spent in fourth.
- The resurrection is not unlike shifting gears in a car. God’s plan seems to lurch to a halt at the cross. Jesus dead. Jesus buried. But things roars to life Easter morning. Jesus’ resurrection sets things in motion and first gear is engaged. And it’s glorious. And things cruise—but only in first gear. It’s not until Christ returns that there’s an upshift; which is the point of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

Proposition

- **At Jesus’ return the resurrection shifts into high gear**
- Have you ever red lined a car? For the entire chapter Paul’s been preparing us for the climax of [verses 50-58](#). The RPMs have been slowly and steadily climbing throughout the entire chapter and by the time of verse 50 we’re at the red line; it’s time to shift.

Transition

This morning I want to take you through the...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three gear shifts that occur at Christ’s return...**
- But before I do that I just want to say a word of reminder about the importance of the resurrection. Why in the world have we spent so much time in chapter 15? I realize this is old hat for some of you. It may be new to others but why so much time on something that others might summarize and teach in one or two weeks? What’s the point?
- You spend time talking about the most important things right? And for the Christian there are few things, if any, that are more important than the resurrection. The resurrection is central to the gospel about Jesus; without it the good news of Christianity is empty. And if we have a faulty or shallow understanding of the resurrection by extension we will have a shallow and or faulty understanding of the gospel. It’s with that in mind that Paul says way

back in [verse 3](#) of chapter 15 *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* Paul says along with Jesus death for sins and his burial nothing is more important than the resurrection. It is a matter of first importance. And in my mind the most important things are the things we should spend time talking and thinking about. There really is no better soil to sink roots down into. It's the deep truths from chapters like this that really anchor a person. In all honesty, the better question for us at the end of chapter 15 is why have we spent so little time on something so important?

Transition

All right, I need you to get back into car mode. Shifting. RPMs. Red lines. The [first](#) upshift occurs in [verses 50-53](#). Christ has been raised. His resurrection means that one day there will be a future resurrection for his followers. Until that happens things just cruise along—not much changes—until Jesus returns. When he returns things get interesting. There's finally an upshift. **The body is transformed.** And all the promise of this thing called resurrection begins to be fulfilled. Listen. *I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*

Main Points

- Last week we talked at length about the kind of resurrection body the Christian will receive. Back in [verse 42](#) Paul says it will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful; a spiritual body, not immaterial, but a spiritual body without the limitations of sin or sickness or disease. It's a body that is like Christ's body. Paul says in [verse 49](#), we'll *bear the likeness of the man from heaven*. And so the question naturally follows, when does all that happen? We know from 2 Corinthians 3:18 that during this life Christians *who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit*. But that transformation which comes about in this life is partial and incomplete. Basically it's still first gear. The RPMs might be climbing but there hasn't been an upshift yet.
- Starting in [verse 50](#) Paul makes it clear that bodily transformation, glorification, the culmination of *ever increasing glory*, the upshift, happens at Christ's return. *I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery* Paul says. In other words, nobody could make this stuff up. God revealed this. Not everyone is going to die. But every Christian, both living and dead, will be transformed. *We will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet*. Bodily transformation. At Jesus' return the Christian's earthly body becomes fit for heavenly existence.
- Paul's words here are reminiscent of the words about Jesus' return in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For*

the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. It's at that moment, the moment of Christ's return, that this transformation takes place.

- When you walk into a grocery store there are aisles for different kinds of foods. You've got the baked goods in one section. The deli in another. Perishable things like fruits and veggies are in a section all by themselves. And then there are the things like canned goods and other non-perishable items that can stay on your shelf for what seems like an eternity. In order for a food to move from the perishable aisle to the imperishable, in order for a fresh green bean to make it's way from the fruit and vegetable aisle to the non-perishable aisle one aisle a radical transformation is necessary. That's a bit of a poor analogy because I've just likened the resurrection body to a canned green bean. But I think you get the point. Transformation is necessary. The two are not the same. They're both still green beans but they're radically different.
- When you think about these verses you just can't help but worship. And smile. And marvel. Our bodies which take a lifetime to unravel and slowly degenerate and die, God transforms them in the blink of an eye. *The dead are raised imperishable, and we will all be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.* And while we wait for this upshift, while we wait for our bodies to be clothed with the imperishable we do as Romans 13:14 says. Right now. Today. This week we *clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.* We do as Colossians 3:12 says. *As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* Because the outward bodily transformation that occurs at the upshift, at Jesus' return, is nothing more than the culmination of a transformation that is supposed to be taking place on the inside right now—by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- And it begs the question, if you're not being refashioned, retooled, transformed on the inside what makes you think that one day, at Christ's return, God will change the outside, the body? The two go hand in hand. And so we humble ourselves and beg of God, Lord change us both now and at Christ's return. And we yield our lives to the influence of God's Spirit to change the parts of us that, on the inside, are incapable of inheriting the kingdom of God. *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*¹

Transition

Bodily transformation is not the only upshift that occurs at Christ's return. There's more. There's another gear. Look at [verses 54-57](#). **Death is defeated; sin is made powerless.** *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "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*

¹ Galatians 5:19-20

power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

- At Christ's return there's bodily transformation but there's also victory over death and sin. Death is not simply the result of decay through normal human process.² There's no such thing as the grateful dead. Death is unnatural. It is ugly. It is evil. A few years ago my uncle passed away from pancreatic cancer. My mom said that seeing her brother in the throes of death was the most horrible, ugly thing she's ever witnessed. Death is torturous. It is villainous. And it is the result of one thing alone; it's the result of a sinful life.
- Paul says in [verse 56](#) that *the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law*. We die; we experience death because of our failure to live up to God's standard, his law. The law shows us what is right and what is perfect and what is good. It sets before us God's expectations. And by showing us the picture of perfection his law reveals how far we are from that standard of perfection; the law shows us our sin. Romans 7:8-9 *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. 9 Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.* But at Christ's return there's an upshift. For those who follow Christ the resurrection shifts into another gear and **death is defeated; sin is made powerless**.
- Do you know what Paul does in these verses? Basically he taunts death. These verses are about as close as Paul gets to rapping. In [verses 54 and 55](#) he quotes two passages from the Old Testament, one from Isaiah 25:8 *he will swallow up death forever* the other from Hosea 13:14 *Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?* Basically Paul's laying the smack down on death. He's taunting death. Take that, death! He's sneering at death. As [Eugene Peterson](#) puts it in [The Message](#), *Death swallowed by triumphant Life! Who got the last word, oh, Death? Oh, Death, who's afraid of you now?* Or in the words of an eloquent five year old nanananaboobo.
- Paul's point is that at Christ's return there's an upshift. Things kick into gear. At his return death is defeated and sin made powerless. Yes we all still die. But that doesn't mean the victory over death is a hollow one. Why? Because at Christ's return the stinger of death, sin, is removed. Yes we still die but it's a stingless death. Jesus has absorbed the sting.
- The story is told of a boy and his father driving down a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon. The windows are down and a bumblebee flies in the car window. The little boy, who's allergic to bee stings, is petrified. The father quickly reaches out, grabs the bee, squeezes it in his hand, and then releases it. As the boy calms down the father reaches out his hand and points to his palm. Stuck in his skin is the stinger of the bee. "Do you see this?" he asks. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you."³
- That's what Jesus has done for us. The picture is that death, like a bee, repeatedly tries to sting the Christian but can't because Jesus has fulfilled the law which you and I were unable to keep. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.*⁴ Has Christ done this for you? Have you allowed him to become cursed for your sin? If so, then the venom of death prepared for your sin has been absorbed by Christ and at his return death

² Fee, p. 806.

³ www.preachingtoday.com submitted by Adrian Dieleman, Waupun, Wisconsin. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 1.

⁴ Galatians 3:13

is drained of all potency.⁵ Or in the words of the English poet [George Herbert](#), "Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener."⁶

- Again, the application for us is pretty straight forward. The defeat of death that occurs at the upshift, at Jesus' return, is nothing more than the climax of God's gradual and continual defeat of sin that is supposed to be taking place on the inside right now—by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:2 *because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.* And so the question needs to be asked, are you being set free from sin right now? In [verse 57](#) Paul says *thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* There is both a future and present part to this victory. Yes victory over death and sin happens ultimately, finally, at Christ's return but this is also a promise for the present. By the power of God's Spirit who lives within the Christian there must be victory over sinful habits and behaviors and attitudes now. Are you living victoriously now? Are you experiencing victory over sin now? And the hardest question of all, if not, if that's not you're experience now, what makes you think that at the upshift, at Christ's return death will be made stingless for you? Run to the cross. Run to his grace. And whatever you are struggling with right now never forget the promise that *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Transition

Bodily transformation. Upshift. Death is defeated; sin made powerless. Upshift. There's one more change of gears. One more verse. Look at [verses 58](#). **Rewards are bestowed for past labors.** *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

- Paul concludes all these words about the resurrection with an exhortation, a command to be faithful in the present. *Stand firm* he says. *Let nothing move you.* When I'm trout fishing and wading in the stream the water is constantly trying to push and move me. It's a constant fight to stay in the right spot. That's what Paul is saying. It's possible, and it's happened to some I know, to shift away from all he's just talked about.⁷ Don't allow anything to knock you loose from the moorings of this testimony about Christ *that he died, was buried and rose on the third day.* Instead, be firm and immovable. Brace yourself for a never ending onslaught that will try to push you and move you away from these core truths. *He died. He was buried. He rose again.*
- And as we stand firm in our belief that Jesus rose and one day we too will rise—the application of those truths is work. Labor. Do things in this life count for eternity; things that have eternal, lasting consequence. There will be rewards for work done now. Get involved with the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Do something about the problem of modern day slavery that still exists all over the world. What about poverty? Last I checked poverty hasn't been eradicated yet. Work to save marriages that are crumbling all around us. Find something to do here at church. There's need going unfilled. Don't just fritter your time away as if things never change. They will. And maybe sooner than you realize. Christ is coming back. His return is imminent. The upshift is coming. And when he returns he will

⁵ Garland, p. 746.

⁶ George Herbert, English poet, 1593-1633

⁷ Fee, p. 808.

reward those who have labored in his name. Positively, absolutely, give yourself fully to the work of the Lord right now in this life because all that we do will linger till his return; all will be remembered. 2 Corinthians 5:10 *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Rewards will be bestowed for past labors.* So labor now. Give now. Serve now. Sacrifice now. Not just because he is worthy. Which he is. But because he has been raised.

- One of the resolutions made by [Jonathan Edwards](#) when he was still a teenager was this. “Resolved: to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.” Is that your approach to the Christian life? Or is your plan to take your foot off the accelerator, turn the cruise turned on, and coast into eternity? I hope you make it.

Conclusion

- In 2006, [David Copperfield](#), the famous illusionist, purchased four tiny islands in the southern Bahamas called Musha Cay. He says he found the spot by connecting lines between magical places around the earth. In his words, “There is Stonehenge in England, I drew a line from Stonehenge to the statues in Easter Island in Chile and another line between the Pyramid of Giza in Egypt to the Pyramid of the sun in Mexico and those four lines intersect at a specific spot in the ocean and it so happens that is where my islands are.” He paid \$50 million but thinks he got a bargain. He believes that one of the islands contains the fountain of youth. In a telephone interview with [Reuters](#) Copperfield said, "I've discovered a true phenomenon... You can take dead leaves, they come in contact with the water, and they become full of life again. ...Bugs or insects that are near death come in contact with the water, and they'll fly away. It's an amazing thing—very, very exciting."⁸ Sounds like Copperfield has come up with his greatest deception yet.
- The only magic elixir of life that really exists, really works, is the blood of the man who was once dead but is now alive. His return is very soon. The upshift is coming. *When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*⁹ Let's pray.

⁸ Jane Sutton, "Copperfield Says He Owns 'Fountain of Youth,'" Reuters (8-15-06).

⁹ Luke 18:8