

NIKE

1 Corinthians 15:54–57

54. *So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.*
55. *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*
56. *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.*
57. *But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
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Introduction

The chapter title is the Greek word for victory: *nike*. It is pronounced nee-kay. *Nike* means victory, and victory is winning.

Love wins. That is what love does. That is what the Bible says about love in the Song of Songs, the greatest song ever written, the song on love. “Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it” (Song 8:6). This is the Old Testament parallel to the apostle’s teaching in his ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13, where he says in verse 13 that love abides. Love abides through the fall, through all of history, through the cross, through all sins,

through death and the grave, through the end of the world, and through all the endless years of eternity. God will never tire of his people in eternity. Love abides.

Abiding, love wins. *Nike*.

Winning is what the apostle speaks of in verses 54–57 of 1 Corinthians 15. He quotes from Isaiah 25:8 that God will swallow death in victory. Paul boldly faces death and asks where his victory is. In the apostle's doxology at the end he uses the word *nike*. When the apostle mentions victory he refers to love winning, because these verses of 1 Corinthians 15 cannot be divorced from the rest of the epistle, from chapter 13 in particular, and from the epistle's theme of love.

Not any love wins. The corrupt love of the world and the false church does not win. When the theologians speak of God's love for all men, his ardent desire to save all men, a love of God that sent Christ Jesus to die for all men and punished Christ Jesus for all men, but likewise say that not all men are saved, they teach that God's love is a dismal failure. When Reformed theologians teach as high—the highest—theology the rank contradiction that a God of election and reprobation in the preaching of the gospel expresses his ardent desire that everyone who hears the gospel be saved, and likewise acknowledge that this will of God and his expression of love frequently fail to save, they also make God's love a failure. When many teach as the very essence of covenantal theology that God extends a promise of salvation to every single baptized child as an expression of his love toward those children, but that many to whom the promise is given end up in hell, they make God's love a massive failure in the covenant. It is not surprising that where this failed love of God is taught, there is also a failure of love among men. Marriage ends in divorce and a new marriage begins with expressions of love because the old love failed: husband and wife do not love each other anymore.

The Spirit speaks of God's love and God's love as it is communicated to his people in Christ Jesus. It is the love that the

apostle has been speaking of throughout the whole epistle. It is the love of God for his people manifested in the cross of Christ and the love he sheds abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit when he makes his people spiritual people. About this love the apostle says, "Love wins."

In the context the apostle has spoken of the gospel. The gospel is the proclamation that according to the scriptures Jesus died for the sins of his people and arose the third day. If the dead saints rise not, Christ is not risen. But now is Christ risen and become the firstfruits of those who slept. The resurrection of saints belongs to the gospel. Further, the apostle has revealed what the resurrection body will be, and he has spoken of the source of the resurrection body in Christ: as is the heavenly, that is, as is Christ Jesus, so are those who are in Christ. Since flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, this mortal must put on immortality. It is the divine must of the counsel and will of God for salvation in Christ.

When this mortal puts on immortality and this corruptible puts on incorruption, then is brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). This victory is the promise of the gospel. This victory the believer confesses as his hope. In this victory love wins.

Death

The victory in verses 54–57 is a grand victory over the mighty enemy death.

The apostle also mentions the grave, but he does so only because the grave is the seal on death. The grave is the place of corruption, rot, and defilement. The grave is the place of death's power. Nowhere is the power of death more evident than when a body is put into the ground and turns to dust. Death and the grave are thus one in these verses.

Death is one reality as far as the scriptures are concerned. Death has many aspects. There is spiritual death consisting of

man's total depravity, in which he is judged guilty of Adam's sin in the garden, is punished with Adam's pollution and defilement, and is thus conceived and born dead in sin. Thus every man is dead in trespasses and sins. There is also a distinct physical aspect of death, consisting of the end of earthly life when the unity of body and soul in which God made man is violently torn asunder. And there is eternal death, consisting of the eternal punishment of sin, so that immediately after physical death the wicked are cast into hell in their souls, from which there is no escape. After the resurrection of shame and everlasting contempt, they are condemned to hell body and soul.

Yet death remains a single reality. At its heart death is separation from God. God is life. He is the living God. To know him is to have eternal life. To fellowship with him is life itself. To live apart from God is death.

When the apostle mentions death, he is referring specifically to physical death. This is clear because his subject is the resurrection of saints.

Death passes over and dominates all life. A man is born dying. His life is continual death, even from a physical viewpoint. He comes from the place of death in the womb, and he enters into a life of death. Injury, tears, and sorrows all belong to life. The very best of the seventy or eighty years allotted to some men is labor and sorrow. To death, physical death, belongs all the diseases, struggles, aches and pains, and eventually the complete breaking down of a once physically strong body. In an instant man may die. His life is a vapor, and he is in the midst of death. Man recognizes this. Only the spiritual man lives in light of this.

Death, physical death now, as a man can see it is also the end of a man. This is what physical death says all by itself. Man is exposed in death as weak, ignoble, corruptible, and mortal: a nothing. Let well-wishers pile as many flowers as they care to on a casket and let the undertaker work very hard, but they cannot take away that pale, sick, yellow color of death. Physical death is

the absolute end of man's present existence. All a man's relationships are broken, and he goes to his long home in the grave. He is a tree cut down. In the place where the tree falls there it shall be. His place and his name perish.

When death comes, it appears to swallow up life, to have the victory, and to overcome believers. This apparent victory of death is especially painful for the believer because he says, "I believe that I live and shall not die." Yet he dies, and all that he labored and lived for is with his death apparently brought to an end.

Death, sealed by the grave, is the testimony that man goes to hell and is the possession of hell. Death all by itself bears the testimony that a man is conceived and born in sin, that he hurries toward the grave all his life long, and that the grave empties like a stream into hell.

Death stings, then. In that sting there is a power of corruption and utter desolation. As a scorpion's sting has the power to kill, so death has a sting and power. The sting of death is sin. The sting of the scorpion is his venom that he injects. If he did not have his venom, the stinger would not be so painful. The sting of death, that which makes death so hurtful, is sin.

The power of sin, or that which makes sin so powerful, is the law. That which makes a scorpion's venom powerful is its neurotoxin. Why does one die from a scorpion's venom? What makes his venom so potent? The neurotoxin does. What makes sin so potent that it brings instant, spiritual, physical, and eternal death? The law.

Death the destroyer of worlds!

The sting of death is sin.

The strength of sin is the law.

The sin of one man, Adam, brought death into the world. What made that sin so powerful that it brought Adam and his whole posterity and the entire universe into sin, darkness, and death and made all humans worthy of eternal condemnation? The answer is the law.

First, the law makes sin powerful to bring instant death because

the law exposes the real nature of sin. We would be tempted to say that Adam only misused the tree. He only ate a little piece of fruit. That is man talking about sin, and man always underestimates sin. Sin itself likes to lull man into a peaceful sense that all is well with him. But the law comes and sin revives. The law makes sin exceedingly sinful. The law does not let sin suppose that it is not very sinful.

Take Adam, for example. Man says the only thing Adam did was eat a piece of fruit, but the law says he did not love God. This is a very serious matter. God is and must be worshiped and served with all a man's heart, mind, soul, and strength. Anything less than perfect love of God is hatred of God. To hate the living God is death. To be at odds with the will of the living God is death.

Not loving God, Adam rebelled against God, who was Adam's life. He separated himself from God. He committed treachery against the God who is good and who was good to Adam. He hated his wife too. He hated all his children and destroyed his whole family. He hated them and went after his own pleasures and followed his own counsel. He rejected the word of God. How sinful was Adam's sin? It was sin against God. Man lifted up his hand against God. Because the sin was against God, it was worthy of temporal and eternal punishment for Adam and all his posterity.

What is true of Adam's sin is true of the sin of all men. It is exceedingly sinful. The law tells us that. This is not often our own view of our sins, but the law says that whatsoever is not perfect and does not proceed from the perfect man is worthy of death. The law says that the man who is not perfect is wholly sinful.

Second, the law is the power of sin because the law enflames sin. It is as a wind that blows on the embers of a fire. The law does not improve sin but makes sin worse. The law to a sinful person is as a wind that blows on embers and whips them into a firestorm that burns down half of a national forest. Take a natural man and teach him the law, and it will not only make him more aware of how sinful he is, but will also fan the flames of his lust. The law is not at fault, any more than the wind can be blamed for burning

down the national forest. The person who left the campfire unattended is at fault. The law is good and holy. Man is carnal.

The law, then, also curses man. It expresses that imperfect man is worthy of death and must be brought into utter desolation. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). Being against the law, sin is against God, and God curses man and brings him to nothing.

Death is not a force independent of God, but in death we always have to do with God. Death is God's. He kills, and he makes alive (1 Sam. 2:6). Death is not a natural process. Death is the punishment of God against sin. Death is the word of God against the sinner to punish the sinner for his sins and to bring that sinner into eternal desolation. Death is the reality with which all men have to do because God is the reality with which all men have to do. Death is sinful man's enemy because God is sinful man's enemy. Death is terrible and mighty because God is terrible and mighty against the sinner to take vengeance for his offended glory against his creature who did not love him.

Death Swallowed Up in Victory

The victory of 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 is that death is swallowed up in victory.

It is not merely that death is put off for a time. That is the only victory the medical community and the doctor can give and that about only one aspect of death. They can put off physical death for a while. Man spends thousands and millions to stave off death for a time. He conquers cancer as though in that he has conquered death. Death has more than one way to take a man.

The victory over death is not merely that it is escaped. That would be some victory if death were escaped. But the apostle says more: the victory is that death is swallowed up. The victory swallows up death; the victory eats death and gulps death down so that death is no more.

The victory comes to pass when “this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality” (v. 54). When the apostle says “this mortal” and “this corruptible,” he is not referring to only the body. He refers to the body as it is the instrument of the believer’s whole life. Paul speaks of the believer’s whole life and all its relationships: marriage, family, church life, and life in the world. It is all “this mortal,” and all of it is “this corruptible,” because when he dies it all ends.

To say that victory swallows up death when “this mortal” shall put on “immortality” and “this corruptible” shall put on “incorruption” means that when the victory comes, there is the complete renewal not only of the believer in his body, but also of his whole life that consists in the perfection of that life and all his relationships. “This”—the same “this” that is now mortal and corruptible and that bears the image of the earthy—shall be made immortal and incorruptible and shall bear the image of the heavenly.

The apostle refers specifically to the resurrection body, but he goes beyond the body and sees man as he is destined to inhabit a glorified creation with a glorified church. Immortal and incorruptible human beings need a fitting home and habitation for eternity. This mortal, which became such in Adam, must put on immortality. Immortality is that new resurrection condition of the spiritual, the heavenly, the glorious, and the incorruptible that is beyond the possibility of sin and thus beyond corruption.

Because this mortal puts on immortality and this corruptible puts on incorruption, it also fellowships with the living God. What is immortality and incorruption except perfect fellowship, friendship, and love of the triune God beyond the possibility of sin? The victory is the perfection of the covenant of grace. To live apart from God is death. To live with God for all eternity is life.

When this happens, death is swallowed up in victory.

When this happens, God’s people have their victory.

Victory by Promise

This victory comes by promise. Death is the word of God against the sinner, but there is another word: “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. I will swallow up death in victory.” Twice in verses 54–57 the apostle alludes to two Old Testament passages concerning this victory.

In the first passage there is the promise of complete victory:

6. And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.
7. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.
8. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. (Isa. 25:6–8)

The apostle also refers to love’s oath in Hosea 13:12–14:

12. The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up; his sin is hid.
13. The sorrows of a travailing woman shall come upon him: he is an unwise son; for he should not stay long in the place of the breaking forth of children.
14. I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes.

There God refers to the obstinacy of Israel as a child who fights his mother to be born and comes to ruin because he spent so much time in the birth canal. So also by their stubbornness and obstinacy God’s people are brought to death. But God will ransom them from the power of the grave and redeem them

from death, and in so doing repentance will be hid from his eyes so that he will utterly destroy death and the grave without mercy.

This is nothing different than what happened in the garden of Eden thousands of years ago. As soon as God spoke the word of judgment, he immediately spoke the word of the gospel concerning his will for victory over death.

The victory over death and the swallowing up of death are the will of God. The victory and swallowing up of death are based on the promise of God and his own word. This is not the vain hope of God's people but is God's own revelation. It is God's testimony to his people that they shall have the victory. The one word of God all through scripture and all through the ages is that he will at last swallow up death in victory.

Because victory is based on the promise and word of God, it depends on him and not at all on man. Because victory depends on God and not on man, this victory is certain, since God does not fail. To open the grave and to call forth his people personally and individually and to renew their lives and to grant them new resurrection bodies and the new life of the eternal heaven and earth are the works of God. As God says in Hosea, "I will ransom," and "I will redeem." God says in Isaiah, I "will swallow up death."

This is the wonderwork of God's grace, which the apostle mentions in his hymn of thanks to God in 1 Corinthians 15:57. "Thanks be to God" is literally "grace to God." Thanksgiving consists of grace to God, the very grace that he bestowed on his people. The victory that God brings is the wonder of grace as the power of God to lift this whole sin-cursed creation, permeated by and under the dominion of death, to the heights of perfection and heavenly glory.

That the victory is by promise means that it is God's will. It is God's will in love. The victory over death, because death is God's, must proceed from the will of God that he is willing to reconcile his people to himself and to receive them into his fellowship again. He willed that for them because he loved them with an eternal love. In this victory God's love wins.

It is completely inconsistent, then, with the description of the victory to say that God intended victory for everyone, but unfortunately not all of them receive it. This is exactly what many say: “God’s love is for everyone. In love God offers salvation in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear.” If love wins, and love wins because God wins, then that thinking and that theology speak evil of God because many to whom God in love offers this victory do not accept it and do not triumph. So God fails and his love is defeated.

If I thought that God loved every human being, I would immediately turn into a universalist and believe that every human and angel and devil, including Satan, Stalin, Hitler, and the man of sin, will be saved, rather than to teach that a single person whom God loved did not receive the victory.

What kind of victory is it when a vast majority for whom it is intended die in the war and never enjoy the spoils of victory? Yet this is the victory of all conditional theology, which is no victory at all, but when all things are considered is a massive defeat of God by the monstrous alliance of Satan, sin, death, and the grave. This alliance of fiends managed to wrest from God those whom he intended to save and to whom he offered salvation, so that as a badly botched rescue operation most of the hostages are killed in the skirmish.

Since the victory is of God, by promise, and by his grace, it is also certain and thus for the elect alone. It is intended for them alone, it is accomplished for them alone, it is given to them alone, it is certain only to them, and exactly because the victory does not depend on them at all.

Through Christ Jesus the Lord

The chosen instrument of God’s victory is Jesus Christ: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 57). “Through” Christ means that Christ is the instrument of victory.

Christ himself personally is the gift of God’s grace and the fulfillment of God’s promise. In Jesus Christ, God comes to his

people to accomplish their victory and to win that victory for them. It is important that God comes to them and that God wins the victory over death because death is his. It is the deadly consequence of his offended justice in which he kills the unrighteous sinner. Since man sinned against God, man must make the ultimate and eternal payment, yet it is a payment that only God can make. In Jesus Christ, God became a man in order to make satisfaction for the sins of his people to God. The only work that is perfect and pleasing to God is his own work, which he accomplished in Christ. He made perfect satisfaction for sin. He endured the punishment of death—death in all its forms—for the sake of his people. That is the reason Christ said, “It is finished.”

God accomplished the victory in Christ’s cross and by the resurrection of Christ. The power of death is a matter of sin. The strength of sin is the law of God. God has a case against man that must be settled. God settled that case in the cross by making satisfaction for the sins of his people so that his people are freed from the curse of the law and thus freed from the power of death.

“Through” Christ also means that Christ by his resurrection is the living lord who applies this victory to his people. God gives the victory through Christ. No man who is not united to Christ by faith has this victory. Separate from Christ, a man perishes in his death now and eternally. Victory is had only through Christ. Victory is had in Christ only through God’s gift. When God gives this victory, and this is the victory, he gives all of salvation. He gives the resurrection because he gives every part of salvation.

This points out how wicked it is to say that man merits salvation, for in a sense the apostle passes over every triumph of the gospel now as though they did not exist and speaks only of the victory that comes at the end of time and the resurrection of the dead, and about it all he says, “God gives it.” The end of salvation, that for which God’s people hope in this life and without which they are of all men most miserable, is the resurrection. If God gives the resurrection, he gives all of salvation. Since salvation

consists in the resurrection, and man cannot raise the dead, God put salvation—all salvation—outside of man's ability.

God gives the victory. He gives it from beginning to end—from the garden of Eden to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Receiving the Victory with Thanksgiving

That God's people receive the victory with thanksgiving denies that the victory is only in this life. If they hope in this life only, they certainly are unthankful and are of all men most miserable. If a man's gospel or a church's gospel, if your gospel or my gospel, teaches a victory only in this life, that victory is not the victory that God gives in Christ Jesus, and it is not the victory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That carnal victory theology was preached by the false apostles whom the apostle Paul combated in Corinth with the example of the apostles in 1 Corinthians 4:8–13 and to whom he alludes again in chapter 15:19. The false apostles brought unspeakable trouble to the church by their denial of the resurrection. By their false doctrine they taught the people to hope in this life, to seek this life. Belonging to their wicked victory theology was the teaching that suffering for the gospel was unnecessary and foolish and that the Corinthians should rather get as much out of this life as possible and rejoice now.

If a gospel does not teach God's people to die daily and in their deaths to hope in the resurrection, that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ and is no gospel at all. The apostle showed that on account of the hope of glory he died daily (v. 31).

The victory teaches God's people to lose their lives in this world that they may gain their lives in the world to come. Victory teaches them that they may use this world, but never at the expense of the gospel, for this world and success in this world are not their victory. It is a kind of death when believers suffer for the gospel. In some cases it is worse than death. When the persecutors finally kill the believer, his suffering is ended. But when they taunt him, ridicule

him, slander him, and speak about him behind his back; when they attempt to make him fearful, take away his name and place in the world, and later imprison and starve him, and they do all these things to his loved ones too, then the believer suffers a terrible death, though he lives. So it is also in a similar way with all the sufferings of the children of God. They die daily. That is their victory.

Being at war with the world, they are at peace with God. Being separated from death, they are enemies now of death and of all death's allies and friends. Will believers have peace in the world? They can only have peace by giving up the gospel and this victory. Victory in the world requires a different kind of labor and laboring than this victory. Victory in the world has a different way of life than the way of love and requires a different walk than the walk of love.

A man cannot have both. If he will have victory in this world, in the world to come he will have utter defeat at the hands of the living God whom he opposed in this life. A man cannot have the gospel and victory in this world.

Yet that is the victory of many. The evident problem of the victory that common grace would foist on the church is that it is a victory in this life. For the sake of argument, grant that everything common grace promises comes to pass: through the cooperation of the church with the world they produce such a good and godly culture as history has never seen. Let us grant that there will be a Christian culture, that there will be earthly justice and wealth for all, and that there will be an equitable government and fair laws. But it is still a victory in this life. For that reason it is not the apostle's victory, or God's, or Christ's. The apostle says that the victory comes only when the last enemy death is swallowed up in victory. If you will have this victory, in this world you must have suffering and persecution, and you must be separate from the world.

The victory of the postmillennial, with his righteous earthly government and his Christianized society, which is the church

extended through the whole world, has the same problem. People must live in the church, and it is far from perfect. As it is now, the church is far from being the society that I would want to rule the world, not to mention the bickering schism that boils within the circles of the various postmillennial powerbrokers. Besides that, what of death? What happens when death comes? Death still happens within this world of Jewish dreams. Whatever victory there is this side of the grave is overcome by death, and the victory does not swallow up death. On the very face of it, common grace and postmillennialism cannot be the victory, for they have not dealt with and cannot deal with death.

The victory of the gospel has a word about death. Death is swallowed up in victory. That is some victory. That is true victory when death is swallowed up. That happens in the world to come.

That this victory is received with thanksgiving also means that it is opposed to all working for this victory. The victory does not oppose working. The apostle in verse 58 gives the practical implication of faith in the resurrection of saints by calling everyone to abound in the work of the Lord because their labors are not in vain in the Lord.

However, the victory opposes working *for* the victory. Working for the victory is the teaching that puts the victory exclusively or almost exclusively in the future and hinges or suspends the believers' reception of that victory on their working or on some condition that the believer must fulfill. Believers receive the victory with thanksgiving. The grace that God gives to them in Christ Jesus returns to him not in working for salvation, but in the joyful reception and enjoyment of salvation and thanksgiving to God for that salvation. This thanksgiving the apostle describes as "abounding in the work of the Lord" (v. 58). It is daily sorrow for sin, the daily practice of thanksgiving, the daily life of prayer. In short, to receive the victory with thanksgiving is to walk in the way of love.

Because God gives the victory and his people receive it certainly and with thanksgiving, that truth opposes all doubt. The victory

is not in doubt. Else how could there be that brazen challenge of death? The apostle stares death and the grave in the face and asks, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (v. 55).

What a challenge from a mere man!

What a bold defiance of death by a man who not only must die yet, but who also suffered so much at the hand of death all his life!

What a cry of victory from a man who must live and sin a lot yet!

That is faith's brazen challenge of death and the grave, faith in the resurrection of Christ. If saints do not rise, neither did Christ. Since he rose, so must his saints. By faith they receive the victory.

Faith receives it now already. God gives this victory at present in the spiritual victory of believers over sin so that they are not overcome in their spiritual warfare. God gives a little more at their deaths. He gives the victory in its entirety in the general resurrection.

Believers will tread on death and the grave. There is nothing that can harm them. If death cannot harm them, nothing can harm them. In Christ they stand with their feet on the neck of death and challenge death. Death challenges them in the face of their sins. Death challenges them in the face of all their sufferings. Death challenges them in their persecutions and sufferings for righteousness' sake. Death challenges them in the face of their own deaths. They defy death's challenge: "O death! where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Their sins cannot destroy their hope. Their sufferings cannot separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Persecution cannot make them deny Christ. By death they enter into eternal life.

Since the victory is received with thanksgiving, the victory is for God's glory. There will be no boasting in that day. There will be no praise of man in that day. But when the last enemy death is put under the feet of Christ, God shall be all in all. Thanks be to God who will shortly bruise Satan, death, and the grave under the feet of his saints.