

How God's Word Produces Our Work

by John Piper

The Word of God has the power to transform us and give us hope and victory over death and sin, through the power of Christ.

Duration: 47:46

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:51

Topics: "Biblical Meditation", "Christian Victory"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of falling in love with the Word of God and the glorious realities it presents, ultimately leading to falling in love with God Himself. The speaker shares personal reflections on facing prostate cancer, highlighting the dangers of melodrama, forgetting one's own pain-free experiences, and indulging in self-pity. The sermon delves into the biblical text of 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, discussing the victory over death through Jesus Christ and the practical implications for steadfastness, immovability, and abounding in the work of the Lord. The speaker encourages the congregation to read and memorize Scripture for strength and peace in challenging times.

Transcript

Father, I pray that Bethlehem would fall in love afresh in 2006 now with the Word of God, and more than that, with all the glorious realities that the Word of God presents to us as true and beautiful. More than that, with you underneath and in and behind and above all of those glorious realities, may we fall in love afresh with you. I pray that we would be a church who loves the Word because we're hungry for your reality.

That we come to the Word every day in searching for you, longing to know you, eager to fellowship with you, eager to remove every artificial barrier between our soul and your reality. We're not just a bookish people, Lord. We want to be a God-besotted people, and you have chosen to reveal yourself to us, to mediate your reality to us through your written Word by your Spirit.

Oh, may we discover more deeply than ever that reality in 2006, I pray. In Jesus' name, I ask for your help to make this plain. In Jesus' name, Amen.

There are two reasons now why I chose this text for today. One is that it's the last Sunday of Prayer Week, and we have a custom at Bethlehem to sandwich Prayer Week with a message on prayer and a message on the Word. Because prayer and the Word, we believe, is right at the heart of how you live the Christian

life, and so last time was prayer and the victory of God, and this time is how the Word of God brings about the work of man.

At least that's part of the point. But it's mainly, in my head, chosen because there is something in this text, I know you're looking at that and saying, where is that in this text? This text is not about the Word of God. It's not about Bible reading and Bible memorization.

So where are you going to get that? So hold your horses, and we'll get there. That's the first reason why I chose this text. The second reason is that this is the text that I chose when I shared the letter concerning my prostate cancer, which most of you received this week, but some of you perhaps are hearing this for the first time, and you can read the letter at the website, [bbcmls](#), or [DesiringGod](#).

When I chose to share that news, Tuesday a week ago, with staff in the morning, elders in the evening, this is the text we worked off of in order to put it in its proper biblical place, and I want to do the same thing with you in part tonight, this morning. So, there are three dangers that I'm really keenly aware of in talking about my own physical condition in front of so many people, and I want you to be aware of the dangers so that you will pray with me that they don't happen, okay? Danger number one is melodrama. Melodrama, if you look it up in the dictionary, means saying something in an overblown way or a sensationalizing way that is out of proportion to the reality, and the reason that feels like a danger to me is because I am so aware as one of the pastors of this church that your situation, that is many of you, is so much more serious than mine, probably, as to make mine look like chicken pox, and I don't want to make light of any of your crises by overplaying my hand.

That would just be a terrible misuse of this moment. That's the first danger, pray that I avoid that one. The second danger is that I forget that I am pain-free.

I have never in my life struggled with extended suffering. Not now, and not any time in my almost 60 years past. Therefore, for me to lift myself up as some model, some paradigm of belief and faith, having weathered some great storm, would be absolutely naive and untrue.

Some of you have lived with such long and extended pain. I've never lived with long and extended pain, and therefore, I must not forget how easy my life has been to this point, and I have not been sorely tested, and therefore, there is much yet to prove in this faith here. That's the second danger, that I would forget that and start thinking that I had crossed some barrier of belief, and there's no more war to be fought.

Here's the third danger, the indulgence in self-pity. How pleasant it is for the fallen ego to exploit a moment of difficulty to gain sympathy and admiration. And you remember, some of you do, you remember from [Desiring God](#) in the chapter on pride, in which I argued that self-pity and boasting are flip sides of pride.

Self-pity is pride posing in the demeanor of weakness, and boasting is pride posing in the demeanor of strength. Now we know the second one, right? We know when somebody's boasting, we say pride. We're not as clear-headed about this issue of who, who, me, who.

That doesn't look like pride to us, but it is pride. It's very manipulative. People know how to use their pain in order to get other people to fawn over them, and that would be a mistake I could make.

I'm wired sinfully enough that I can enjoy people feeling sorry for me, or standing in awe that I am weathering this crisis. So those are three dangers that I would just like to avoid, and I invite you to pray with me that they not happen. So the question you might ask, and I ask myself this question, I ask it with

Noel, I ask it with some other counselors, should I even talk about it? I mean, let's just get on with the business and let it lie, and you can tell what I decided to do.

And there are two reasons now that I have, one experiential and one biblical, for why a little piece of this sermon, and we're going to get to the text, believe me, we will, why I've decided to do it. Number one, the experiential reason is this. Something is terribly dysfunctional in a family when dad has cancer and nobody's talking about it.

Dad's not talking about it. Nobody knows what dad's feeling about it. They're afraid to ask him.

Everybody's tiptoeing around this thing, and there's this elephant in the room, and nobody's naming it. A lot of families that function that way, whether it's cancer or whatever, alcoholism or whatever. This elephant is there every Thanksgiving, and nobody's naming it.

Nobody's talking about it. Dad never says a word. He's just a quiet type.

And I think the church is like a family, and I think the elders are like fathers, and I think we need to be a healthy church, not a dysfunctional church. And I would like to set a good example for you fathers and elders for how to navigate the waters of news that is not always easy to hear. Incidentally, it was a very sweet time on Christmas night when I gathered the family, all the grown kids, put the grandkids to bed, and shared all this.

That's really a powerful thing. You ever done anything like that with your family on Christmas? That was good. That was good.

You really go deep with each other when you lay out these kinds of things in a family setting. We had some sweet and wonderful fellowship and prayer. That's the first experiential reason.

My second biblical reason comes from 1 Thessalonians 2, 7, and 8. It goes like this. We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children, so being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. That just seems so clear to me, that this massive theological giant called the Apostle Paul thought of himself as a nursing mother with his people.

And he loved them so much, he just wanted to share the gospel, and he wanted to just dump some of his heart on them as well. So if it's apostolic to be that way, it just seems like it ought to be pastoral to be that way, and so I'm going to dump a little heart on you as well as gospel. And just at this point, I'm reminded, because I feel really emotional when I read that, the only times I have gotten teary-eyed in the last two weeks is reading emails from you.

It's when other people express emotion toward you that it starts to become overflowing here. And so, that's who I am. Verse 51.

Here we go. We're going to look at this text, and then when we're done walking through the text, I'm going to show you how it relates to prayer week and reading your Bibles in 2006, and then we'll close with how it's been ministering to me personally. Verse 51.

This mystery, behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, that is, die, but we shall all be changed. So the mystery that he's talking about here is that at the second coming of Christ, some Christians are

going to have died, and some Christians are going to not have died, and both are going to be changed.

That's the mystery. Now, what part of it he's focusing on, I'm not quite sure. Or as mysterious, whether it's the fact that some are alive or some are dead, or both together dead and living will be changed.

But that's the mystery. Those whose bodies have decomposed in the grave will be changed. And those who are in the very prime of their teenage life will be changed at the last trumpet.

So both will be changed, some alive, some dead, and both will be changed. That's the mystery. Then verse 52 begins to describe how.

And the first thing he says, it's going to happen in a moment. In the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. There will be no process in this.

There will be no development of your new body. It will be instantaneous. In a moment, in the blink of an eye, those molecules for the dead, in some mysterious, creative, new creative way, reassemble and they're whole.

And we, whether we're old and very much want to be whole, or young and think we are whole, we're going to be changed instantaneously into this new reality. He focuses on two things that are going to change. Perishable condition, mortal condition.

This verse 53, this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. Now, what's the difference between those two words? There is a very, very significant difference. Perishable, just like in English, means decaying, wearing out, running down.

Mortal means it dies. And you might think, well, they're almost the same. No, no, no.

They're not almost the same, because you can die when you're five years old. And you're not so much decaying as you're coming into your own. You're growing up into the place where you'll start decaying.

People die at one, and five, and 15, and 25, and 35. So yes, decaying leads to death. But both here need to be thought of not as the same thing.

There's this process of wearing out and decay that every one of us is going to go through unless there's a sudden snatching. And there's death, which sometimes is the end of that, and sometimes is smack dab unexpected in our prime. And so Paul says both of those are going to change.

Both of them are going to change. When the twinkling of an eye trumpet happens, all the running down, all the decay, all the wearing out instantly is over, and the new body is made, and all the death is done away. We get those bodies which are different.

That's clear from this text, different. We're really happy about that. I mean, there's some young people who think they've got what they want, but they don't.

They don't have any idea how glorious the new spiritual body will be. It will make the most beautiful body on this planet look like a rag doll because we will be fitted physically and spiritually to absorb beauty from God in a way that if we had this body now, we would be incinerated in the presence of that kind of beauty and glory. We must have a much more resilient body to handle the magnificence of what we're going to be handed someday.

So it's going to be different, and yet it's going to be like this one because we know the disciples recognized Jesus when he had his resurrection body. It was quite the different body. It just kind of came and went and passed through doors, and it was really different.

He could eat fish and go through doors. Don't understand it? Spiritual body, it's going to be different. You will know each other.

And then come verses 54 and 55. Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? And those are quotes from Isaiah 25, 8 and Hosea 13, 14.

There are two images, swallowing and stinging. Let's work with those images. They're not the same, are they? They're very different metaphors.

Death swallowed up in victory, and then death pictured another way, namely stinging, and it's gone. The sting is gone. Swallowing and stinging.

I find a lot of help in the swallowing image because death is an enemy. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, 26, the last enemy to be destroyed is death at his coming. So right now, death is an enemy, and it gets a kind of victory.

A kind of victory, doesn't it? And yet, it is swallowed up in a greater victory. Here's a picture in my mind. Did death get a victory over Jesus? It's a tricky question.

Yes, a kind of victory. The devil, Judas, Pilate, Herod, the soldiers, his enemies, we did it. Got rid of him.

But life came, and he rose from the dead, and he didn't just rise from the dead like it's sequential. That whole thing was swallowed up in victory so that the death was the death of death. A title from a John Owen book.

Christ's death was the death of death. And so in a sense, you could say, no, it wasn't a defeat. No, it was the heart of the victory.

He took on our death. He took on our sin. And he bore it, he died with it, and blew it to smithereens.

He came back from the life. And so the death and the resurrection of Christ are properly spoken of as just being swallowed up in victory. And the same, not exactly, but the same way death does get a victory over us.

Tears flow. It isn't the ideal. It's not what we were ultimately designed for.

There's pain in the approach, and there's loss, and so on. And yet, this text is saying that death, that death, is swallowed up. I have this Old Testament picture in my mind.

You remember the battle of Ai? There were a couple of battles like this, two or three, where at first they were defeated, the Jews were defeated. And then God says, I'm gonna give them into your hand now that you've repented and gotten the sin out of your community. And so here's the way you're supposed to do it.

Take a small band, like 5,000, and go up to the city. They look out, they know they beat you yesterday, and they're coming out after you. And then you fall before them.

There are 30,000 men behind the city. Remember that? So they fall. A kind of defeat happens.

In fact, probably a few arrows took out some of the guys. Some paid their lives for that tactic, probably. They fall back.

All the city comes out, and whoosh, swallowed up in victory. What felt like a defeat, we're backing up, we're backing up, we're backing up, and here come the 30,000 behind them, cut them off from AI, and they're gone. And that's the way we should feel about death.

We're falling back, it's gaining, and it takes us out here, and then whoosh, it is swallowed up in victory. So I find that image very, very helpful. The other one is the sting image.

Where is your sting, O death? And if you look at this word for sting, it can mean any sharp-pointed thing. It's used in Revelation for the sting of scorpions. I have that in my mind.

A scorpion can sting you, kill you sometimes. How should we think about the sting? Where is your scorpion, poisonous, lethal sting? And my answer is that it's gone. The sting, is the sting gone? Or is the lethal poison gone? I want to say it paradoxically, just because I think that's here and I think it's in Jesus.

The sting is there and it's not a sting anymore. It's a sting that has lost its sting. It's a death that has lost its death.

The reason I say it paradoxically is listen to these words from Jesus. See if he doesn't sound this way. Remember John 11? I am the resurrection and the life.

He who believes in me, though he die, mark that. Though he die, yet shall he live. And he who lives and believes in me shall finish it.

Never die. Oh, which did it? Do we die or don't we die? And he won't leave the paradox. You do and you don't.

The death of death is gone. Yes, there's death and no, it's not death. Yes, there's sting and no, it's not a sting.

Yes, the poke happens and no, there's no poison in it. No lethal poison. So I find that image also realistic and helpful.

Now, how can this be? And he explains in verses 56 to 57. 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. Now get this, because this is the gospel.

This is the gospel. The reason death is horrible is because of sin. Because sin means this is damning, punishment.

Hell is on the way, just over the horizon are the flames. That's what makes death terrible. Sin, sin.

The wages of sin is death, double death. Sin puts the horror in it. My guilt is what makes me so afraid to die and the law is the power, I'm at the end of verse 56.

The power of sin is the law. What gives sin the power to do this to us? The power to damn us? The power to fill us with justified guilt? It's law. Whose law? God's law.

The law says do this and you'll live. The soul that sins, it will die. There's a curse from the law and it's on us, all of us.

God's law authorizes, empowers the sentence of death written across our hearts. My death is punishment. My death is welcome into everlasting suffering because I've sinned and the law of God says that's what you deserve, go there.

That's the sting. And then verse 57, sweet beyond words, once you have felt, verse 56. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Death is swallowed up in victory. Sting of death is gone. Thanks be to God.

God did this. God undertook to do something about that horrible, horrible, horrible state that we were in where death was absolutely terrifying to us, held just on the other side. God made us into that by putting His law to say, you are damned, my law and justice require it.

And then the Lord God said, now I will step in and I will solve that problem. And He solves it through Jesus Christ who satisfies all that the law ever required of us. That's why law is mentioned here because through Jesus Christ means that law which is taking the sin and turning it into an authorization of damnation, that law through Jesus is totally satisfied.

All of the demands it made on us are performed by Him all of the punishments required of us are borne by Him and therefore we can say, thanks be to God through the saving work of Jesus Christ. My life is swallowed up in victory. That's good news.

Galatians 3.13, just to put the text on Christ's work. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. It is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.

So that's where we should be and that's where He went so that the curse of God is gone, it's gone. There is therefore now no curse, no condemnation hanging over me. What have I to fear? Or 1 Peter 2.24, He Himself bore our sins.

Would you mock Him by being afraid that your sins are going to take you to hell? Would you mock the sufficiency of His sin-bearing work by not enjoying your forgiveness? Don't do that. Enjoy it and so make much of His sufficiency. For those who are in Christ, death remains and Paul describes it in two ways.

One, 2 Corinthians 5.8, away from the body is at home with the Lord. And secondly, Philippians 1.21, to die is gained. So that's what's left of death when Jesus gets through with it.

He doesn't take it away yet. He will in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet when the mortal puts on immortality. Then it will be taken away totally, but now, stinger gone, law satisfied, sin removed, door to paradise.

Now how does this relate to reading your Bibles and memorizing Scripture? It relates because of the therefore, the word therefore in verse 58. Therefore, having heard the last 20, 25 minutes of that exposition, therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. In other words, Paul intends, God intends for this news of verses 51 to 57 to have a practical effect, and verse 58 describes the practical effect.

So, it goes like this. Christ has come. He has died.

He has taken all your sins. He has satisfied all that the law demands. The stinger has been removed.

There is now no condemnation, no hell, no fear. Your body is going to rise from the grave. Christ will come.

The trumpet will sound. The mortal body will put on the immortality. The perishable will put on the imperishable.

The decomposing, decaying body will become imperishable. Death is swallowed up. Blood bought.

Christ wrought victory. To die is gain. Therefore, God's will for John Piper is therefore, God's will for you is therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Now, I ask you this. If you do not read verses 51 to 57 and think about them, understand a little bit, embrace by faith, memorize for use in doctor's offices, hell will therefore happen. It won't.

I prayed downstairs that those of you who are not wired to govern your life by the logic of the Bible would be rewired by this message. There are some people who chalk that up as a personality issue. I don't think that way.

I don't do therefores. You don't have an option. God has revealed glorious things to you.

And when He's done revealing them, He says, Therefore, be steadfast. And you don't have the option to say, I get steadfast somewhere else. I don't do conclusions.

I don't draw inferences. I don't move from news to behavior. I coast.

Well, God, would you rewire brains in this room so that they are wired to profit from the Bible? It's very simple and obvious to me that when Paul says, Therefore, since death is swallowed up in victory and the sting is removed and the law is satisfied and the sin is gone and Christ has got a victory, you need to know it so that it can have an effect on your steadfastness. And I just think you ought to read your Bibles to know that. And I think you should memorize them so it's there in the doctor's office when you need it.

Steadfast means keep on going. Moving steadily. Put your hand on the plow.

Don't take it off until your work is done. Don't be given to fits and starts. Steady movement forward.

Immovable is a different word. It's a very stationary word. The first one is steady movement.

The immovable word is be like a rock and the tsunami comes in and you're the only thing on the beach left. Or be like a tree planted by streams of water that meditates on the law day and night and when the drought comes, every leaf withers but yours. Every tree gets brittle and drops its leaves but not yours.

The roots are where? Down in the word. That's what immovable means. Be a rock, be a tree.

And then abounding in the work of the Lord. Abound in, kind of a religious-y word. We don't talk that way much.

Don't say to your kid, Abound in obedience. We say obey all the time. That's what that means.

Do lots of work. Abounding in the work of the Lord means fill your days with things that count for Jesus. Fill them up.

Fill them up. Abounding in the work of the Lord. I think Paul means for this to happen because we've read our Bibles and memorized them and believed them and carried them into the day.

So read your Bible. 2006, let's read our Bibles together. Let's memorize Scripture together.

Okay, I'm almost done. December 21st, urologist finishes his exam and says, that doesn't feel like it usually feels. I'd like to do a biopsy.

This is my anniversary, 37th anniversary. He leaves me alone in the room, tells me how to dress, and he's gone for 10 minutes or so. And a stab of fear came into my heart.

Stab of fear, right into my heart. And I prayed to the Lord. I did not have a Bible with me.

But guess what I had? I had my memory. And boy, did I go to battle on that dagger. Get out of there.

Where'd you come from? You don't belong there. Here's some promises. Dagger against dagger.

And guess what? I almost fell asleep before he came back. That was a gift, just such a sweet gift, lying there on that table. You know, it's really funny how they try to help you.

You lie on the table like this, and they've got cartoons on the wall, same angle, with four-letter words on them. I'm thinking, this is not helpful. I did pray with my urologist, by the way, when we went in, Noel and I. That's the way we've walked together in the last few weeks.

Word, prayer, peace. So let me just close with the means of the Word that God has used to help me and us. 2 Corinthians 1.8, almost one of the first ones.

I don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning the affliction that we endured in Asia Minor. We felt that we had been given the sentence of death. That was to make us rely not upon ourselves, but upon God who raises the dead.

Now, there are a thousand good purposes in what God is doing in me right now. A thousand plus. I don't know 99% of them, but I know one of them.

Helping me not rely upon myself. And helping me rely upon the God who raises the dead. That's the purpose.

I don't need the other 999. That's just enough. He's good.

He's wise. The therapy is tailor-made for my need right now by God. That's number one.

Number two, how sweet 1 Thessalonians 5, 9 and 10. It comes to me in a dark moment. I can't remember morning or evening.

God has not destined you for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep, we will live with Him. Don't you love biblical clarity? I mean, it just is golden clarity. You tap that one and it rings clear.

There are no ambiguities in that verse. John Piper, God says, you are not destined for wrath. This is not wrath, but for salvation through Jesus Christ.

Not you. Not you. You're nobody.

You're a sinner. Through Jesus Christ who died for you so that whether you're taken out at 60 or get 80, you're going to live with Him. That's why I want you to read your Bible.

I was with six guys down in Louisville, Kentucky praying and strategizing about big things the last few days and shared this with them. We were talking about post-modern, post-propositionalism and how bad it is. And I got real animated in Al Mohler's basement and almost broke a vase.

And I said, okay, when I stand up at this Together for the Gospel conference and talk about this, I'm going to say, God has not destined me for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for me so that whether I die or live, I live with Him. Don't take my propositions! These people, these post-modern emergent types think they're just moving beyond this enlightenment propositionalism. I say, well, I don't know where you're going, but I know a few propositions that I will live by, die by, and there's one of them, and there are about 18,000 others in the Bible.

Don't get uppity about post-propositionalism. I will have propositions like, you are not destined for wrath. That's a statement with a verb and a subject and a few other grammatical pieces that matter infinitely to me.

I get really exercised about this stuff. This philosophical mumbo-jumbo about how new everything is because we're going beyond the doctrines and beyond the propositions. Thank you.

I don't know where you're going, but I'm staying right here with verses 9 and 10 of 1 Thessalonians. I'm almost done. I was lying in a motel or whatever it was, when I'm reading through the Bible with you, Psalm 4, 7 and 8. You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound in peace.

I will both lie down and sleep for you, oh Lord, will cause me to dwell in safety. And I have slept every night. I have not laid awake 10 minutes worrying about this.

I think that's a sheer gift of grace mediated through Psalm 4, 8. You will lie down in peace for he alone will make you dwell in safety. It isn't figuring out your possibilities. It's a 1.6 and a .6 and a 2, 5 percent and so very likely this is not lethal.

That is nowhere to go. God gives you these things not for you to do statistical analyses on the stuff. No.

He gives them to assume you're going out of here someday. Could be soon. Use it.

Get real. Benefit here. Don't push this away like I've not given you a precious gift.

And so you take it and you say, now how would I sleep if He said you've got a week? You've got a week. Because that's the way we ought to sleep. And then the last one was the text we've been on when we came to the elders and to the staff.

And we did 1 Corinthians 15, 51 to 58. I said to them, and this is my paraphrase of the therefore. The therefore in verse 58.

I said, you know guys, settling it in your mind that Jesus is real is wonderfully energizing. At least that's the effect it has on me. So here's my paraphrase.

Therefore, because your death issue is solved, therefore, be steadfast, immovable, and work your fanny off. That's my paraphrase. And it doesn't feel like a duty to me.

That's what it feels like right now. To know that the fabric is seamless across death, know Him and enjoy Him now, know Him and enjoy Him there, feels massively energizing to me. Because nothing I do is in vain.

It has no end point. It's significant. This ripple effect just goes on and on and on.

So I hope that one of the effects of this message for us as a church is that we will read our Bibles and memorize lots of it so that when you're left alone for 10 minutes in an Abbott Medical Center room, you will, though you don't have your Bible with you, have your Bible with you. And I hope that you will pray, Lord, take away my fraidness, my fear, and give me peace and give me strength and give me energy, which I believe He will do for you. I thank you very much for your prayers.

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