

# The Sting of Death

*Christian Liberty*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Isaiah 25:7-8  
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Think about the sting of death. As I mentioned in the prayer time, my grandson was hit by a deer on Sunday night and gave me a call, and so trying to get that car fixed with used parts, I got into a truck with a man I'd never met before and asked him to drive me to where the car was at my daughter's house, and I looked on his dashboard and what did he have?

He had a scorpion. Now, I would like to make a joke and say, and he taught it to do tricks. No. It was the exoskeleton of a scorpion. Scorpions have exoskeletons, not unlike shrimp, and so what happens when a scorpion dies, its exoskeleton can still be intact. So, there was the exoskeleton of a scorpion, then I thought, wow, what a thing to have on your dashboard. It was a pretty good-sized scorpion too.

Scorpions have a stinger, and it's interesting when you read the book of Revelation that the scorpion is cited as an animal under the control of Satan to inflict pain on human beings in Revelation 9 (Revelation 9:3, 5, 10). Now, I want you to think for a moment about a stinger. There are scorpions that are deadly to a human being, and there are scorpions that are not, and even a baby scorpion can kill an adult if it's of that particular species of scorpion because the poison is rather than being hematological, it's neurotoxic, and so it is a neurotoxin, and it immediately gives a burning sting. And it's interesting that that is the analogy that's used in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 8:15; 1 Kings 12:11-14).

Let's look there at the quote where he says, first of all, in verse 54 of 1 Corinthians 15, when the perishable has been clothed with imperishable. What does that mean? Well, let's imagine that right now, this is my body right here and let's imagine that it is a perishable body which it is, it's a corruptible body. Now imagine that I am putting my coat on now, which is already on me, what the picture is: Is at the resurrection, this mortal body,

this corruptible body, puts on something over it, and that which he puts on over it, or you will put on over it, is immortality and incorruptibility.

So, it's not that the body disappears at the resurrection; it's that the mortal body, the corruptible body, the body that's subject to rotting and decay, suddenly is transformed by adding something to it that it did not have before, which is an immortal coat, an incorruptible coat. So, the mortal clothes itself with the immortal, and the corruptible, subject to rot and decay, puts on that which is not subject to rotting and decaying, and that's the picture.

So he says, "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.'" (1 Corinthians 15:54)

Now I made a reference to that particular scripture, if you look down at the bottom of the page, "C" for verse 54 is Isaiah 25:8, and we ought to turn there just for a moment because Paul is referencing two passages of scripture in his famous ending of 1 Corinthians 15.

So if we go to Isaiah 25 and verse 8. Isaiah 25 and verse 8. So he says here, and this is striking, page 1,095, in verse 7, let's get it in context.

Isaiah 25:7: "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations."

What is what mountain is he talking about? He's talking about Mount Zion. He's talking about the place where the city of Jerusalem was, and he's saying that on that mountain, God is going to destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations.

There's a great darkness among the people of the world. There's a shroud over them, a shroud of depression. Most people that I've met in life are depressed people. They live in fear. They live with anger turned inward. They're upset. They're disappointed in life. And this is the description of the nations of the world, that they live with a shroud, a sheet that covers them. But God says, on this mountain, what mountain? Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the place where the temple of God once was, the place where the temple of God under Solomon was built and destroyed on the ninth day of the Jewish month Av in 586 BC and destroyed by the Romans, the second temple destroyed by the Romans on the ninth day of the Jewish month Av in AD 70. And he's saying that in that place, God would destroy these things. He would wipe away the sheet, the shroud. What place?

That's where Jesus was crucified. This is a prophecy of the coming of Christ. He says that on this mountain, God would destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations.

Verse 8, "He will swallow up death forever." What does that mean? I pointed out back when I preached on that text about two years ago, that the Canaanites believed that death was a monster, a literal monster whose mouth reached from under the earth up into the skies. So imagine a giant monster, the Canaanites believed in this monster, and they were terrified of this monster because what this monster did was to swallow up everything.

(The Canaanites understood death as a god with one lip touching the earth and the other touching the heavens so that he swallowed up everything.

According to Bildad, "the firstborn of death," following in the footsteps of his father, eats away the skin and devours the limbs of the wicked.

According to Is. 25:8, the Lord will "swallow up death forever." (Sproul, R.C., eds. (1995) *The New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), p. 721)

Think of the things you value in life, think about physical possessions, for example, think about relationships with people, think about your youth, what did you look like when you were in your prime? I know that I looked a lot different when I got married than I look today. I'm an old man and everything that's valuable in life the Canaanites saw in their god, Mot (מות). Their god Mot (מות), that monster was going to eat it alive and swallow it up and the son of death was going to gnaw the bones and eat them that way.

That's what Canaanites believed, and it's reflected somewhat in Isaiah's teaching here and so he says, "He will swallow up death forever."

So think of a big mouth, who's got the biggest mouth here? I do. No. Think of a giant mouth. God's mouth is bigger than the giant mouth of the Canaanite god, Mot (מות), death. God swallows up death itself when he dies on the cross. Christ defeats death by his death and resurrection. Christ by his death and resurrection swallows up Mot (מות) himself, the Canaanite god, death. And that is a profound truth.

"He will swallow up death forever," and then he says, "The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken."

So we see that's one reference that Paul has here in 1 Corinthians 15 where he says, "Then will come to pass." When is this going to come to pass?

When are people going to be able to say that death has been swallowed up in victory?

Well, it happened when Christ died and rose again, but it will happen in your case and my case when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again. He hasn't yet come. He's going to come. Remember that a thousand years with the Lord is as a day and a day is as a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8). It's not yet been two days. When you and I rise from the dead, when these rotting, corruptible, mortal bodies put on immortality and incorruption, then that will be finally and definitively fulfilled for all of us.

Now then look at verse 55, "Where, O death, is your victory. Where, O death, is your sting?" Now there's a textual variation here in the Greek text where he has a reference to the grave. The victory and the sting, think about the sting of death for a moment. Think about people who lived in a desert climate. The Middle East is full of scorpions everywhere, and particularly in certain parts like the Judean wilderness.

The sting. Why is death said to have a sting? And what is that sting? Well, he tells us exactly what it is in verse 56, "the sting of death is sin." That's how death came into our planet. There was no death here when God created the world. When God took six days and created the world and at the end of that he rested on the seventh and he looked at this world, and he said it was very good, very good, there was no death here (Genesis 1:31). No animal died. Certainly, no human being died.

I made a hundred in college when I took a class on zoology that focused on evolution. I understand evolution through and through. I completely reject it. I've never found any scientific evidence to prove evolution. In fact, the more we know now, as over against in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the more we realize it's impossible for these things to have happened, particularly, as we understand the structure even of a cell and the atoms in our bodies.

Do you know that your body is as if it were filled with billions of universes? It's an interesting phenomenon. I don't believe in evolution. I've never found evidence of it. I take the Bible in the first 11 chapters of Genesis as actual history of what really happened, and I think that the widespread belief in evolution is what has destroyed our public school system, which in turn has destroyed our societies.

I was on the phone yesterday with someone for a longtime, very fearful, feeling in another city, "We're going to have to borrow money because I cannot afford to send my children into the public-school systems of Memphis." They're dangerous places, particularly for the soul of a child.

Why? Because when you accept macro-evolution, what does that mean? One species evolves into another. When you accept that, you remove the necessity of God, and when you remove the necessity of God, then you and I are no different than a possum or an armadillo that gets run over on the side of the road and that's that.

So what is he saying here? He's saying that sin is the sting of death. How did death come into our world? I take the Bible at face value. God told Adam and Eve one thing, do this and you will live, don't do this, and "to die, you will die (מוֹת תָּמוּת)," or as it would be rendered in Greek, "dying you will die," which in Hebrew grammar is the most emphatic way you can say anything. The moment you eat, you're going to die. What I want to say is this, when they reached out for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, at that moment, the stinger hit in the most fundamental way, the stinger hit and split apart everything.

Adam died that day in the most fundamental way. He hid himself from God (Genesis 3:7-8). He knew that he couldn't face a holy God from that moment on. Never before had he felt that way. They were naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25; 3:10), and not only from that moment on, when the stinger stuck and stung and brought the deadly pain, the neurotoxin to the soul (Genesis 3:8), they turned on each other.

They had known what no marriage has ever known in this world. They had known complete bliss, complete harmony, total satisfaction in each other. Eve was the most beautiful thing Adam had ever seen, and he cherished everything about her from the way she thought to the way she talked to the way she laughed. Everything. No flaw in her. And she cherished everything about him. He was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. She had no trouble submitting her will to him, and he had no trouble submitting his needs for her needs. In fact, their needs were fully satisfied in the garden.

But the moment that they bit of the forbidden fruit, at that moment the stinger shoved itself into them in their heart of hearts, and from that moment on there was never harmony in their marriage, never peace in their marriage (Genesis 3:12-13).

All reconciliation in this life is superficial. No matter how intensely we attempt to be reconciled with another, it's all superficial. It'll never be fully reconciled till we're at the judgment of seat of Christ where he wipes away all tears, where everything you and I've ever said, done or thought will be made known and nobody's going to be pointing a finger at us because everybody's going to be pointing a finger at themselves, and that's when the

nail-pierced hand wipes away all tears (1 Corinthians 4:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 7:17; 21:4). That's when Eden is restored.

But what happened is, “for since by man came death” (1 Corinthians 15:21), death entered this world, that stinger stuck into Adam, that stinger stuck into Eve, and they were estranged from God, they were estranged from each other, and here's the amazing thing: That neurotoxin caused mental illness and to this day, I can say without reservation, Donald Trump is insane. I can also say Joe Biden is insane. And I can say you're insane, and I'm insane to some degree. Insanity is part of the human lot from the day that the stinger stuck itself in Adam and stuck itself in Eve. They became fragmented in their being.

Well, he said, “In the day you eat it, dying you will die.” The most intense way to say it in the Hebrew grammar. What about their bodies? What happened at that point in time was psychosomatic. The mental illness eventually worked itself out into the body.

*Psyche* (ψυχή), the soul, the *soma* (σῶμα), the body—psychosomatic. The estrangement they felt from God, from each other, from the world around them, and within their own being, a fragmented soul, a broken image of God, from that moment on, it began to work itself out. In the first couple, it took centuries. After the Genesis flood, it did not take so long. In today's world, not long at all. Need a knee replacement? I thought about getting one sometime. Hip replacement? I thought about getting that, trying to avoid it, I don't like knives. Any shoulder trouble? It's all part of what happened.

So, “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of” the body (1 Corinthians 15:21). “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

I want you to think about something. “The sting of death (verse 56) is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”

He quotes there from Hosea 13 and verse 14, and this is what we see here. Paul takes this statement, and he expands on it in page 1,410.

“I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?” (Hosea 13:14)

Plagues, the word translated plagues, (דֵּבַר *deber*) (**I made a mistake, I should have said, “Destruction, the word translated destruction”**), (קֹטֵב *qōṭeb*) in Hebrew is the same word, sting, that that's used in the Greek translation of it (*kéntron kéntron*). A stinger.

You know what? The cord that they used to beat Jesus with on Good Friday, early in the morning before they crucified him, it was a cat-o-nine tails. A cat-o-nine tails had tied into the leather straps—little pieces of metal, stone, and they were designed so that when the person beating the person pulled back on the whip and laid that on the person's back, it stuck into the meat of the person's back. And then what happened was when the man jerked it back, little pieces of meat came back. (A. κέντρον outside the NT . . . . "Spur," "whip," "goad" . . . to drive horses, oxen and other beasts of burden . . . = μάστιξ' (Schmid, Lothar, in Kittel, Gerhard and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds. (1964) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), Vol. III, p. 669)

They were called stingers and the same Greek word is used when Paul is describing his conversion and Jesus speaks to him from heaven and says, "It's hard for you to kick against the pricks, the goads" (κέντρον κέντρον, Acts 26:14). A sharpened, pointed wooden object.

This is what I want you to see. The Lord Jesus Christ in dying and rising again in the city of Jerusalem, destroyed death. He opened his mouth and swallowed up the big-mouthed Canaanite god. And he, by taking that stinger with the whip, and something even greater than that, by taking your sin and my sin on the cross, because that's the sting of death, sin. He took it. Isn't that a beautiful picture? The Lord Jesus Christ has done this for you and that's why our *Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks about Christ having purchased for us liberty from certain things, including, it says, "the sting of death" and "the victory of the grave."

Think about it again, the sting of death. Most people die painfully because what happens is if you're wide awake, you have a muscle cramp. Have you ever had a muscle cramp in your calf? I get them from time to time. And your toes. Think about the most important muscle in your body, the heart muscle, having a muscle cramp. Extreme pain, the gasping for breath and dying. Wow!

What's beautiful is this, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) God sent his Son in the world to take the sting of death from you.

Such is the story of a father when there was an insect, a wasp, a very powerful wasp in the car and he knew that his son was subject to shock, and the father grabbed the wasp and held it in his hand as the wasp, stung and stung. The father wouldn't let go because he loved his son so much. He

wouldn't let his son experience the deadly shock of that wasp sting. He took it all himself.

That's what the Lord Jesus Christ did for you. That's what God the Father did in the person of his Son.

Do you know the Lord? To know him is to know freedom from the fear of death. Hebrews 2 tell us that Satan holds people in bondage to the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). To be free of the fear of death, dear ones, is true Christian liberty.

May we pray.

*Lord, we pray that you would help us as we ponder these things about Christian liberty, to remember that we are free indeed because Jesus Christ, our Lord, has conquered death, he has taken the sting of death into himself and so died an agonizing painful death so that there is no sting for us anymore in death. In Jesus' name. Amen.*