



Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## I Show You a Mystery

David Schelhaas

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## I Show You a Mystery

### Abstract

"Death's mystery is still frightening."

Posting about I Corinthians 15 from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/i-show-you-a-mystery/>

### Keywords

In All Things, Christian education, death, poetry, teaching

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# in things

May 25, 2021

## I Show You a Mystery

**Dave Schelhaas**

**Death Swallowed (I Corinthians 15: 51-57)**

Listen, I tell you a mystery:  
We will not all sleep,  
But we will all be changed—  
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.

For the perishable must clothe itself  
With the imperishable,  
And the mortal  
with immortality.  
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.

“Where, O Death, is your victory?  
Where, O Death is your sting?”  
The sting of death is sin  
And the power of sin is the law.  
But thanks be to God!  
He gives us the victory  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ

St. Paul

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St. Paul writes mostly in prose, but once in a while, as in the passage above, he gets so excited that he can't restrain his inner poet and he launches into a poetic riff that knocks us off our feet. Romans 8:31-39 has the marvelous “more than conquerors” passage, and Romans 11:33-36 the great doxology that begins, “O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God...” And then there's the great love poem in I Corinthians 13. But the poem I have printed here from I Corinthians 15 is as exciting and confident and comforting *and poetic* as anything in holy scripture.

To explain how and why I taught this St. Paul poem in my American Lit class, I will give a bit of my teaching history. I taught American Literature in Christian high schools for 23 years, and each year, I taught a poem by William Cullen Bryant—a standard in every anthology—titled “Thanatopsis,” which means view of death. Bryant wrote the poem when he was eighteen years old; a time, I suppose, when many thoughtful young people begin to recognize their own mortality. He tells his readers that when thoughts of “shroud, and pall / And breathless darkness, and the narrow house / Make thee to shudder,” they should take comfort by realizing that when they are buried, they are joined with nature (“the oak / shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mould.”); their grave, the earth, is most beautifully decorated; and they are lying in the earth with the majority of those who have lived, including kings and geniuses.

After seventy lines of this kind of explaining, he ends the poem with these stirring lines:

“So live that when thy summons comes to join  
That innumerable caravan which moves  
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
Thou go not as the quarry slave at night,

Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

I soon realized that my students were not “sustained and soothed” by this poem. In fact, on one occasion, as we were reading the poem aloud in class, a young man leapt up sobbing and rushed from the classroom.

Most of my students were simply indifferent to the poem. But surely, as seventeen-year-olds, they had thoughts of death—so how should I reach them? To answer that question, I want to jump from my years as a high school teacher to my time as a college professor involved in the education of future high school English educators.

One year, as I observed one of my “student teachers” teaching “Thanatopsis” at a local Christian high school, I realized that she was receiving the same kind of student indifference that I had sometimes experienced when teaching the poem. The class was just plain dull. Eventually, the bell rang and a short time later, the young student teacher came to my office for my evaluation of her teaching that period.

I criticized her rather severely: “Do you think these kids, who are the same age as Bryant, might also possibly have thoughts of death? You are a Christian teaching in a Christian school—do you think perhaps that might influence your approach to this poem?” Among other things, I suggested she might want to teach I Corinthians 15 as a companion piece to Bryant. A year after she had graduated, I received this email from the young woman, now a high school English teacher:

“On Friday I taught “Thanatopsis” which I taught at Unity during one of the observations you made of my student teaching. You told me to bring I Cor. 15 to the discussion. Well, I took your advice this year and, after we discussed the views of life and death, I read Paul’s words to them. The kids loved it! We had one of the best discussions we’ve had all year about life and death, fears that they have in connection with death and dying, and just what it means to be a Christian—death has no sting.”

There are moments in a teacher’s life that are richly rewarding.

My long-time friend, mentor, and fellow English teacher, Mike Vanden Bosch, sometimes used what he called a “dialectical approach” when teaching literature. This involved placing next to each other two literary works on the same subject but with different perspectives and using one work to examine the other

as my young student teacher and I did with “Thanatopsis” and “Death Swallowed” from I Corinthians 15.

As she said after pairing St. Paul with Bryant, “The kids loved it! We had one of the best discussions we’ve had all year...” I had similar responses when I placed the two poems side by side.

Why have I called these verses in I Corinthians a poem? Notice how in the first line, he grabs our attention by using, “Listen,” an urgent, imperative verb. And then he says, “I will show you a mystery.” His language is metaphoric: “Sleep,” “clothe,” “swallow.” And what dramatic language: “flash,” “twinkling of an eye,” “sting of death.”

Not all the great poems are in the lit book.

And a final, personal comment: This poem was the text of my mother’s funeral sermon. She died when she was forty-nine and I was a senior in college. It was a devastating time for me and my entire family. But I have held on to the I Corinthians 15 promise of the resurrection. Every Sunday, I say with Christians all over the world “I believe in the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting.”

It is usually a comfort to say those words, but it is often recited in a sort of mechanical mumbling. Death’s mystery is still frightening.

But when I remember St. Paul’s exuberant poem, oozing certainty in Christ’s resurrection and ours, taunting death, filling the air with flashes and eye twinkling, I’m ready to shout and dance. Thanks be to God. He has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.