

Death Swallowed Up in Victory – 1 Cor 15:54-57

Introduction – “Death, simply considered, is no more than...signifying a cessation of life; or, that what was once living, lives no longer. But it has been the general, perhaps the universal custom of mankind to personify it. Imagination gives death a formidable appearance, arms it with a dart, sting, or scythe, and represents it as an active, inexorable, and invincible reality. In this view death is a great devourer; with his iron tongue he calls for thousands at a meal. He has already swallowed up all the preceding generations of men; all who are now living are marked as his inevitable prey; he is still unsatisfied, and will go on devouring till the Lord shall come...Man was created upright, and lived in a paradise, till, by sin, he brought death into the world. From that time death has reigned by sin, and evils abound...” – John Newton

Death is all around us because sin is all around us. Secret sins in the light of God’s perfect, all-seeing countenance. High-handed sins in our flagrant disregard for God’s perfect and holy law. And He hates our sin. His wrath is stirred up by it and He will judge it with a perfect, holy anger that is eternal, righteous, and good. Death is the penalty for our sin. It is the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). COVID-19 has not increased the number of people who are going to die. COVID-19 has only reminded us that everyone is going to die. But Easter has come. And with Easter comes this Good News – “Death is swallowed up in victory.” Let us consider this statement and these verses as though God were calling to us even now, even in our present distress. Here we find A Declaration, An Explanation, An Offer, An Invitation, and a Charge.

The Declaration – “Death is swallowed up in victory” together with a song, “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” This is the greatest declaration – “He is risen.” “Christ is risen from the dead” (1 Cor 15:20). His resurrection is not only an event, it is a declaration itself (Rom 1:3-4). Christ’s resurrection from the dead declares Him to be Son of God and that declaration is a declaration of power. This is what Jesus meant when He said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die...” (John 11:25-26). As Luther wrote in his hymn, “Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands, for our offenses given; But now at God’s right hand He stands and brings us life from heaven.” In and through Jesus Christ, death has been conquered.

An Explanation – The next verses give us an explanation, “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv56-57). Death is so unnatural; it is so awful. Death is never timely, never feels right. That is its sting. And this sting is the sting, the wages, the consequences, of our sin (Rom 6:23. 5:12). We all sin because we all are sinners by nature, having fallen in Adam’s fall, a fall into sin, misery, and death. That is the lot of the human race – and history is full of proof of this misery. All die. All go through life on a march, day by day, heartbeat by heartbeat, to our impending death.

This explanation actually begins at the opening of Chapter 15, verses 3-8. This is the earth-bound, historic, time and space story of how it is that we have victory over sin and death through Jesus Christ. It is not that God simply thought some nice thoughts and we are to think those thoughts. It is that God did something. His love was action. His love was history-making. His love was manifest in glad sacrifice and efficacious transformation of a world He had created and intended to fix.

Not only was the problem of sin a cosmic problem. God’s solutions were also cosmic. In John 3:16-17, we see that Jesus Christ was not sent to be the potential Savior of the world. God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - will not fail in their united counsel and determination – God sent the Son to save the world. Neither is “world” to be reinterpreted to be a smattering here and there of a few individuals of all the nations; God sent His Son to save the world, not to condemn it. Our duty is not to make this happen, but to testify (through our words, our lives, our love) that God is doing just that (1 Cor 15:25-26).

But this explanation, this Good News, is not preached today in the pulpits of pessimism and dread. And because it is not preached in the pulpits, it is not declared in the public – a public crazed with the fear of pandemic, plague, and death, a public freaking out as though a panic has been inserted into them; a panic worse than a virus – because we do not preach a victorious Savior to this world, for this world, and over this world. But listen to Jesus – “... for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (John 12:44-47).

An Offer – “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom 10:9-10). What is this salvation? It is life from the dead. It is hope from despair. It is deep-cleansing of a filthy heart and soul. It is a song of joy instead of silence and sorrow and mourning. It is adoption instead of abandonment.

Invitation – And so here is your Easter invitation: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Look at how hard the world tries to save itself and yet only falls deeper and deeper into slavery to sin. Look at how hard the world tries to entertain itself and yet only exploits, degrades, and putrefies the common gifts of the Creator. Look at how hard the world tries to create meaning in life and yet only finds loneliness and despair in the end. Death won’t leave them in their faux-salvation – and they are tired. You are tired if you don’t know Jesus. Life is heavy laden.

The Charge – With the offer, with the invitation, there also comes a charge. Jesus is Lord. True. Truth. Settled before the foundations of the world and no one asked you. Death has been swallowed up in victory and you didn’t get to vote on it. The charge is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.