

“O death, where is thy sting?”
Easter Sunday

1 Cor. 15:50. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. 51. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 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. 58. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

I have chosen as today's text one of the most famous biblical passages dealing with the subject of death and resurrection. I am particularly interested in one very special phrase: *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?* (vs. 55). These words ring with clamor and brightness, a ringing that goes on and on long after the words are spoken, like the echoes of the joyous church chimes that sound out on Easter morning. The reverberations are so powerful, so unexpected, so filled with joy, that neither time nor distance succeeds in dampening the clarity and wonder of their message. In the believing heart, the tolling of victory chimes never completely ceases, even when darkness and difficult conspire to silence them. Why is it so?

For the world imprisoned in unbelief, death is the last topic of choice. Dressed in the thin disguises of the popular designer-religions of reincarnation (“We will reappear in a new form”), or universalism (“Everyone will go to heaven”), or even atheism (“We will just stop existing”), the faceless, hooded, dread figure of Death, scythe in hand, still shows its awful form underneath. No matter how strong the resolve, how manly the declaration, how vehement the defiance, how intellectually powerful the argument that is raised up against the reality of death, along each and every roadway strides the Grim Reaper, oblivious of the most effective opponents he encounters. After all, the whole human race belongs to him, doesn't it? Though doors are hastily closed against him, and windows shut and shuttered, though every defense is erected, he knows no place that can be secured from his inevitable arrival.

Even the testimony of Scripture speaks powerfully in his favor:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God (Ro. 3:23) For the wages of sin is death... (6:23)

There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war... (Eccles. 8:8)

7. For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. 8. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; 9. Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. 10. But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? 11. As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up: 12. So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep. 13. O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! 14. If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. (Job 14)

The case for the universality of death seems air-tight. Its cause is sin, and the story of its beginning is plainly recounted in the grand opening of the Bible in Genesis. Because God is the one who established it...:

(to Adam and Eve): But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Gen. 2:17)

(to Adam, after the Fall): In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (3:19)

...it is absolutely, irreversibly established. It can no more be annulled than can any of the physical laws of the universe, though men freeze their dying bodies to be thawed out by some future age of superior science; though others imagine that they will somehow live on through their progeny; though lifespans increase through the blessing and benefit of modern medicine; though quests be renewed for the Fountain of Youth. The “Preacher” of Ecclesiastes seems to be proclaiming what we all don’t want to hear:

3:19. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. 20. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. 21. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Unless...

Unless something, or Someone comes along to cancel, to nullify, to abrogate, to abolish a law that the Almighty God has decreed. And who, other than God Himself, could do such a thing?

-Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. (Rom. 6:9)

-3. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4. And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: 20. But now is Christ risen from the dead... (1 COR. 15)

-This Jesus God hath raised up... (Acts 2:32)

If it were only for His own sake that God raised Christ, however, it would mean nothing to us, who still bear the sentence of death. But today, Easter Day, we rejoice, because:

-4. ...God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, 5. Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) 6. And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... (Eph. 2)

-For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection... (Rom. 6:5)

-25. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. (John 11)

Now, without one shade of impudence, or impertinence, or mortal danger to our own souls, when that all too familiar figure arrives on our doorsteps and claims he brings with him our just deserts, and stands there, tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for us to pack our bags and go along, we can look him in the eye with utmost calmness, and reply: "Wait, wait just a moment, my hasty little friend. Let me quote you a few words from Holy Scripture:

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."

Just say it like you mean it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.