

THE DEATH OF DEATH

by Ray C. Stedman

Easter Sunday is the day when those who seldom go to church during the rest of the year do come. In my judgment this is a very good thing. It is well to have a Sunday set aside as a kind of ecclesiastical open house, during which the essence of what the church believes is set forth for examination and evaluation by those who are considering Christianity. Therefore, we make you welcome, all who are here as visitors or who seldom have come to church this year. But then, the fact that you do seldom come indicates something. It indicates either that you do not fully understand the Christian message and don't know what it is really saying, or that, having understood it, you do not consider it very important.

I am glad you chose Easter Sunday to attend, because the resurrection of Jesus is a fundamental element of Christian faith. Perhaps our consideration of it today may help show you why it is important. The whole point of the resurrection story, the fact that Jesus arose on the third day after his crucifixion, is highly relevant to a question which is important to everyone here: What can be done about death? Surely that is one question we cannot avoid.

There is a common proverb which says that only two things are sure in life: Death and taxes.

There are many who are trying to avoid paying their taxes, but no one gets out of facing the problem of death. Someone has well put it: "Dying my death is the one thing that no one else can do for me."

When Paul wrote his last letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, he was in the Mamertine prison in Rome and was awaiting his own death. As you read that second letter to Timothy you can see that he was quite aware that it was drawing close. He felt that he probably would not get out alive, and he didn't. But in the letter he speaks of

the appearing of Jesus Christ our Savior who, [he says,] abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. {2 Tim 1:10b RSV}

There is a phrase that ought to interest you, regardless of what your views may be on Christianity -- this phrase "he abolished death." That ought to grip every one of us.

Obviously Paul does not mean by this that Jesus Christ eliminated death, because it is still true that despite the great advancements of medical science during the last generation or so, the death rate remains what it has been for centuries -- a flat 100%. And that includes Christians along with everyone else. We all die. But Paul did mean something by the words "he abolished death." It is probably explained best in a passage in the second chapter of the letter to Hebrews:

There the writer speaks of Jesus, who came, he says, to partake of the same nature that we have,

that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. {Heb 2:14b-15 RSV}

It is in this way that Jesus abolishes death. He abolishes the fear of death, removing the sting from it, and thus making it harmless.

I know there are many who disclaim any fear of death. There are many who boldly declare they are not afraid to die. But in listening to this through many years I have detected a rather hollow note about it. This week I

picked up a magazine article and was struck by the opening sentence:

The ancient question of Job, "If a man die, shall he live again?" remains the fundamental question haunting all men today.

This fear of death is revealed in the way we try to hide the fact of death. We do not like the word. There is a daily newspaper published in our land which refuses to use the word "death" in its columns. We do not like to hear it mentioned. That is one difference between our generation and the previous one. In the 19th century the facts of conception, birth, and reproduction were regarded as subjects you never talked about in polite society, but the processes of death were quite acceptable. The 19th century writings were full of descriptions of death and essays about its meaning and effect. But in the 20th century we have reversed all this. We have an almost psychopathic preoccupation with the subjects of conception, birth, and reproduction and talk about them all the time, but the subject of death we seek to avoid, and we refer to it only in euphemisms.

For instance, a body is no longer called a corpse; today we refer to it as "the departed." We do not say that a person has died, but that he has "passed away," or "passed on." Coffins have become caskets, to hold a precious treasure. I was interested to note that in some of the newer mortuary ads, caskets are now becoming "couches," as though to drive away even further all sense of the macabre. I was almost horrified to read in a recent newspaper article of a man who proposed to build a drive-in viewing room, where "the departed" can be laid out for public viewing. You could simply drive by in your car and see these friends who are made up to resemble horizontal members of a cocktail party.

This grotesque pantomime is really due to a morbid fear of death which seeks to flee the tragic facts of our existence. Men are trying to forget that death awaits, that it stands at the end of every pathway and is inescapable, and that we must all be victims. You can see this trend toward escaping such thoughts in the modern attempts to rewrite nursery rhymes for children, to expunge from them all reference to violence and sudden death. That vicious and violence-filled nursery rhyme which many of us learned as children, *Three Blind Mice*, has now been done over and comes out this way:

Three kind mice, three kind mice,
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Who cut them some cheese with a carving knife.
Did you ever hear such a tale in your life, as three kind mice?

In this trenchant phrase of a modern writer, "Death is muffled in illusions."

Dostoevski, the well-known Russian writer, who once faced a firing squad and was delivered at the last possible moment, said:

The certainty of inescapable death, and the uncertainty of what is to follow are the most dreadful anguish in the world.

There he placed his finger on the cause of our fear of death: "the uncertainty of what is to follow." We know not what, or where. And it is this unknown factor that makes us most afraid. Paul the Apostle says, "the sting of death is sin" {1 Cor 15:56a} -- the certainty of judgment. Remember how Shakespeare says in Hamlet, "Conscience doth make cowards of us all." Perhaps T. S. Eliot put it best when he said,

"It is not what we call death that we fear, but what, beyond death is not death. That we fear, we fear."

The passage in Hebrews says that the fear of death produces lifelong bondage. I suggest that this is a true statement and that it is demonstrable in our lives. It limits us, this fear of death. It ties us up. It creates what, in modern parlance, are called "hang-ups," and these are some of them:

1. First, this fear of death drives us. It hurries us at our work. We feel that we must make time count. We are aware of the passing of the years and are afraid that we will waste our opportunities, that we will lose out on the possibilities which are before us. Therefore we must grasp every moment to fulfill it. We dare not stop, dare not rest, but are constantly driven, driven, driven, because we know the

shortness of our time.

2. Then, fear of death makes us worry. Death threatens us on every side. It is what makes us install seat belts in our automobiles. We are constantly pursued by those who wish to sell us insurance against that day when ultimately we must die. It creates concern over our diet and causes us to eat the most unpalatable of foods for weeks at a time, because we are afraid. It is what makes us check out our pains and aches with our doctor. It sends us to him for frequent examinations, lest this physical house in which we live begin to crumble and we find ourselves facing the king of terrors.
3. The fear of death sobers us. How many of us have been aware of times when, even in the moment of hilarity, of laughter and joy, we have been conscious that a sigh was not very far from a smile. We have been afraid to enjoy things because we have felt they would soon disappear, and if we gave ourselves too fully to them we would feel sorrow when they were taken away. It hits us too hard. Many are afraid to love because we feel we may lose what we love and our hearts will be made sad if we allow ourselves to become involved. So the fear of death produces a reserve, a coldness, a suspicion, a withdrawing from life on the part of many.
4. Also, this fear haunts us. Suddenly it impinges on our thoughts when we least expect it. It frightens us in our dreams, and makes us restless. We are afraid to be alone. We don't like silence, but must have a radio or television drumming away in our ears. We constantly demand something to occupy our attention. All this is testimony to an unspoken and unacknowledged fear of death which pervades our society today.

If that is true (and I don't see how anyone can challenge it), it ought to make us receptive to this great message of Easter. What is it all about?

Well, it is a declaration that a breakthrough has occurred, that Jesus Christ has broken through the death barrier and has found a solution to this vexatious problem which hangs like a cloud of doom over every one of us. Somehow he has solved the great Gordian riddle of the ages. He broke through, he rose from the dead. And as a result he offers to break the power of death, and the fear of it, for any individual who comes to know him.

He does this by two means which the Bible declares to us:

- First, he removes the fear of judgment by the forgiveness of sin. There is nothing more fundamental to Christianity than that. In the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God was doing something that we men do not fully understand but which nevertheless God declares to be true. He was accomplishing the solution of the basic problem of human evil, which dogs us everywhere we go, the best as well as the worst, the righteous and respectable as well as the evil and the outcast. God solved this basic problem in the cross of Christ. He laid our sins upon him.

I don't know how it happened. I don't know anyone else who fully understands it. It is one of those great mysteries which God declares and which the mind of man cannot fathom or follow. But God has done it, and in Christ men are forgiven.

The wonderful thing is that when forgiveness is once received there is a reaction of joy and gladness, and a sense of the lifting of a load, which can never be forgotten. Men do not call on anyone else for forgiveness of sins. They do not ask, "Oh, John F. Kennedy, forgive my sins," or "Winston Churchill, forgive my sins." But for centuries men have been crying out, "Jesus Christ, forgive me," and they have risen with a sense of guilt removed and of burden rolled away. And, if the burden of sin is taken away, then the fear of judgment is gone. This is the glorious proclamation -- that death does not suddenly introduce us to a piece-meal examination in which we must give an answer for all we have done, but in Christ we are free from condemnation. This is the great declaration. It is the sure word of the Scripture: Any who believe in him have passed from death unto life and shall not come into condemnation.

I shall never forget the day in Chicago, in a YMCA room, when that truth burst upon me in all its fullness. I was a young man, about twenty-one years of age. How vividly it all comes back to me -- the joy, the untrammelled joy, that filled my heart as, lying on my bed in my room, it dawned upon me that if anything happened to me I had nothing to fear in the future. I was forgiven. God had already

judged me in Christ and I was forgiven -- set free. The joy of that has never left me, but has recurred again and again as I have contemplated this great fundamental truth of Christian faith -- that in Jesus Christ, and in his work for us, God took away my sins.

- The second thing Jesus does is to promise us life with him. He said, "Because I live, you too shall live," {cf, John 14:19b}. He demonstrated his ability to fulfill that promise by rising from the dead himself. To me that is a most impressive fact. It is what convinces me that I can trust what Jesus says, as opposed to what anyone else is saying in this day and age.

I have read the writings of philosophers, thinkers, and world leaders of our time, and, in many ways, I am impressed by their ability to state their case with logic and clarity. I find that some of them are experts at so presenting their cause that they can make black look like white and white look like black. To read their arguments is to be impressed. But I have long ago learned that, if what they are saying contradicts what Jesus is saying, then I cannot trust them. I have learned that I must trust, and only shall trust, the one who has demonstrated a knowledge of life surpassing all others, who has positively manifested his ability to solve the most perplexing problem before men -- that of death. He has broken through the death barrier.

I don't know anyone else with credentials like that. If you want me to believe someone, get him to do that and then I'll believe him. But, until then, I will trust the One who has manifested an understanding of the basic solution to the problems of life and death.

This is what changes the whole outlook on death. This is why the Apostle Paul, and those early Christians, as they contemplated their own approaching death, did not feel terror in their hearts. They had no fear of this thing, but could say, as Paul said,

"O death, where is your sting. O grave, where is your victory?" {cf, 1 Cor 15:55}

As a pastor I have stood many times beside a grave and noted the impact death has had upon those who are left behind. I have seen people break up and emotionally fall apart at a graveside, torn by the awful sense of separation from their loved ones. It is a harrowing experience to watch it. But I have often seen Christians facing death, have seen the light in their faces that nothing could rival, have felt the steadiness of their spirit, the sturdiness of their faith, their quiet acceptance of God's will, and even a joy that is manifest in the midst of their sorrow.

I don't know how to explain it except by what is involved in this story of Jesus. Death is no longer fearsome for the believer. Death in Christ means to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. "To depart and be with Christ," Paul says, "is far better," {cf, Phil 1:23}. He has taken away the sting of death and removed its fear and terror. So death becomes but an incident, a moment of transition from this life to the next, and then the experience of joy and blessing beyond expression.

I have here a letter which was written by a young soldier about to die. During World War II he was captured and imprisoned by the Nazis and was sentenced to be executed. Writing from his prison in Hamburg on the day of his execution, this is what he said to his parents:

When this letter comes to your hands I shall no longer be among the living. The thing that has occupied our thoughts constantly for many months, never leaving them free, is now about to happen. If you ask me what state I am in I can only answer: I am, first, in a joyous mood and, second, filled with a great anticipation.

As regards the first feeling, today means the end of all suffering and all earthly sorrow for me. "God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." What consolation, what marvelous strength emanates from faith in Christ who has preceded us in death. Everything that till now I have done, struggled for, and accomplished, has at bottom been directed to this one goal, whose barrier I shall penetrate today. "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for them that love him."

For me, believing will become seeing; hope will become possession, and I shall forever share in Him who is love. Should I not, then, be filled with anticipation? What is it all going to be like? The things that up to this

time I have been permitted to preach about, I shall now see. There will be no more secrets nor tormenting puzzles. Today is the great day on which I return to the home of my Father. How could I fail to be excited and full of anticipation? Then I shall see once more all those who have been near and dear to me here on earth.

And so, until we meet again above, in the presence of the Father of light.
Your joyful, Herman.

That is authentic Christian confidence in the face of death, born out of the great fact we celebrate today -- that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. It is a fact enmeshed in history, attested to by competent eye witnesses who again and again recorded objectively what they saw. It has been confirmed in the experience of thousands and thousands who through the centuries have accepted the offer of God and have found this risen Lord -- found him to be not only the answer to death but the answer to life as well. For he not only offers to remove the fear of death but he offers also to supply the strength that life demands. He who died for us did so in order that he might give himself to us. He died for us that he might live in us. It is here that Christians find the supply they need to face the pressures, problems, and dangers that life sets before them. Christ's love is available. Christ's patience is available, his power, his wisdom, his strength, his longsuffering, his compassion, his courage -- all these are available to those who know him.

This is what we talk about here, Sunday after Sunday. This is what we find to be so strengthening in the midst of daily pressures, upholding us in the hour when the world begins to shake and crumble, consoling and strengthening us in the last hour when individually we do what no one can do for us, face the transition from this life to another.

God's offer stands available today. "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord," he says, "and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." There will take place in your life the simple transaction by which Jesus Christ comes in to live within you and to give you a hope that surpasses life, which goes beyond the grave, removing all its fear and terrors and making you not only able to face death but able also to face life.

Isn't that worth something? There is nothing like it anywhere. No product offered anywhere else can equal it. There is nothing more fundamental to life, nothing more basic, more elementary than this.

That is why today we take great joy in declaring to you what we have found in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, Lord of lords, before whom eventually every knee shall bow, and whom every tongue shall proclaim as Lord to the glory of God the Father. He has solved the problem of history and the problem of death. And he is able to meet the individual need of every life.

May God grant that today you may discover this living Lord.

Prayer

Almighty Father, we are grateful to be reminded again of this most fundamental fact of Christian faith: that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Death could not hold him. He broke the bonds that held all other men in bondage and came forth from the grave alive again to show himself to his disciples. Father, we thank you that the joy and triumph of that event reverberates across the centuries to quicken our own hearts as we realize that these fundamental forces with which we must deal in life have been conquered and rendered impotent by the power of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. We rejoice that in this very severely troubled world we have this great hope which shines as a light in a dark place, this certainty upon which our faith may rest.

We believe, Lord, that the declaration of your word is true, and that there is a greater power than death; that truth crushed to earth shall rise again; that there is nothing which ultimately can withstand Jesus Christ who reigns above all and to whom eventually every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Now, Father, we pray that we may understand something of the practical application of this in our own lives,

that it might not be merely something to sing about one Sunday of the year, but may be a great and underlying truth which touches us in every realm of life and can prove to be the most life changing fact we have ever considered.

Lord, we pray that any who are looking for answers in the midst of a confused world may give careful consideration to this mighty, triumphant fact declared in the resurrection of your Son, and that they may understand that he who is dead is alive again and lives in order to enter human hearts and change them from within. This is the great message the church has to proclaim today. Grant to us, Father, that we may be faithful in the proclamation of it and that together we may rejoice in the great truth we proclaim. We ask your blessing upon our nation in its hour of trouble, and upon all peoples everywhere around the world who, joining together with us today, lift up the glad, triumphant shout, CHRIST IS RISEN! We pray in his name, Amen.

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