

Phil 1

1 Cor 15:26 – “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Death is an enemy. It seems obvious – who likes death? But a closer look at our society and our minds reveals something sinister: we don’t always think of death as an enemy.

I sat with the lady in the nursing home. She had amazing stories. She was the daughter to the French Ambassador, she was traveling on trains all across Europe seeing kings and queens. When the war broke out her family ran from their estate into the French woods, Nazi bullets cracking into the trees around them. Amazing stories. She married a soldier, moved to America, learned to fly a plane. What a wonderful life. But, not anymore, she was in a nursing home. She could walk, read, talk, and eat, but she wanted to die. She didn’t have her wonderful life anymore, so she wanted death to be her ally and remove her from her un-wonderful life of drudgery and age.

I sat with another lady in her home. She was in pain, she was sick, and the doctors couldn’t do any more for her. So her ally was death, “death will help me, death will remove me from this pain.”

Thousands each day, when they get that positive pregnancy test and see their hopes and dreams crashing around them, turn to death as an ally, to get rid of that life.

Others turn to pills and shots to “assist” others by inoculating their death calling it

“merciful.” Teenagers at an alarming rate, depressed and unable to cope with the supposed meaninglessness of life, find death as an ally.

From the Wisdom of Solomon, A Jewish writing from just before Jesus came: “But the ungodly by their deeds and words summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away, and they made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his party. For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, ‘Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy at the death of a human being, and no one has been known to return from death. Because we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been... our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away...’”

And we, two thousand years later, reason just as unsoundly. Telling our children they are random accidents with no future.

So let us reason soundly: God didn’t make evil. It came in his absence when we pushed him away. And with it comes death, the enemy, into this world. Death is just in that sinners deserve it, but it is no friend. It is the enemy that robs the mother of the child she could never carry to term, that robs us of parents and grandparents, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, friends. How could we ever consider it less than an enemy? Madness.

Now I get it, I do. Death is basically inevitable, right? So we gotta get used to it. And we do, for the old folks. This is why, when the nine year old boy dies, “what a tragedy!” But when the 99 year old dies, “it was her time.” Because that 99 year old wasn’t doing cartwheels anyway. And so death becomes a friend or enemy not based on its sole purpose of taking life, but on our quantity and quality of life. It’s inevitable, so we hope it happens when we are old, and when we are sleeping, or something.

Brothers and Sisters, we must recapture the true teaching that death is the enemy. Because it shouldn’t be this way! We shouldn’t grow old and die, we were made to live! And to live with joy and vivacity and love and service and meaning - we are to live abundantly! But this damned thing, death comes along and steals it. What an enemy! Death is never good - at 9, or 99, or 199. It was never to be a part of God’s Good Creation, it is an usurper, and as I mentioned, it is damned – doomed to be defeated by our God. So let us not make an ally of that which our God opposes.

Now, does this mean we ignore it or run in fear of it our whole lives? Do we despair of this inevitable enemy that will claim us all? Not at all, because we know One who overcomes it! Hebrews 2:14-15 – “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver

all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” You see that? The fear of death is slavery to the devil. It is his ally, his tool, to scare us, to make us despair, to bring us pain. And we, by the grace and power of God are called to fight against this fear!

How? By equipping ourselves with the promises and certain Hope of God in the resurrection of God in the flesh, Jesus. This is what the people of God have always done. From Genesis to now, the people of God hope in the One who comes to crush the serpents head, and to bring life eternal, life after death. This is how the martyrs faced, firing squads, lions, and fire. This is why the resurrection of Jesus is the high point of the Christian life, this is why Paul remarks, “If Christ had not been raised our faith is in vain.” If no one beat death, what are we doing here? We would be trusting in a coping mechanism, that isn’t real hope. We might as well go on with our miserable lives, hoping for a bit of pleasure or fame, before we die and we, and our names, fade to nothing.

But Jesus is raised! It made cowardly disciples brave! And it gave them hope. It gave Paul the Hope of this grand confession he makes today. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” That man is not afraid of death, but neither is death his ally, because he explains, “I desire to depart and be with Christ.” The ally here is not death, it is Christ who overcomes it and brings his people through it.

Many a funeral I have done I have heard, “Well it was a blessing they died so quick, so they didn’t suffer.” And I know what they are saying, I do: they are saying suffering is bad. And they are, faithful Christians, saying that they know they are in a better place - “to die is gain.” But let us not confuse ourselves, the only - the *only* way we can say there is blessing in death, is with the cross and the empty tomb firmly in sight.

The empty tomb of Jesus and his promises of eternal life don’t make death our ally, but they do rob it of its power over us so we need not fear it. And in that sense, and only that sense, can we rightly say that to be taken to be with Christ in peace is a good thing.

I don’t remember what I said to those ladies I told you about. One of them, when I talked to them, I was still a Vicar, I didn’t know anything. And don’t get me wrong, they weren’t heathens, they were baptized believers in Jesus, but this goes to show we are not immune to the temptation to make death an ally. Which is why this text is so helpful. When a Christian longs to have their suffering end, now I don’t tell them to pray for death. No, death is no ally. I Tell them to pray as Paul does, “To depart and be with Christ.” That is far better, and a far more faithful saying. Because Jesus is our ally, our Savior.

And until the Lord answers that prayer, we, following the Apostle Paul and Our Lord who marched toward death, we ask ourselves how what has happened to us can, Verse 12, “advance the Gospel.” Our days are in his hands. Our call in this broken world is to advance the Gospel in the days he has given us.

I’ve told some of you about David Stegenga. He was, I think, in his 30s when he went to the nursing home. Internal GI problems, daily migraines, bad legs. I would sit with him, him who had the most un-wonderful life I could think of. And what did I see? Smiles. And what did I hear? About how he prayed with someone in the nursing home and told them the joy he had in Jesus. What a saint! David died four years ago, he has departed to be with the Lord and it is far better, no doubt. But while he was still here, in pain, in suffering, he advanced the Gospel, he made the most of the days the Lord gave him. Not because he just “bucked up,” but because he kept his eyes on the King and his promises of healing and eternal life.

So, again, this doesn’t mean we all *just* need to “buck up” – though a little perspective always helps. But what it definitely means is you need to look to the King, Jesus, to find hope and courage and strength. Notice Paul says he longs to “depart and *be with the Lord.*” But how often do we think of heaven and don’t even think of God. We think of no pain, no sorrow, we think of family, friends, or fishing in the new creation. And don’t get me wrong those are all there. But what of the King? What of the One who died to wash us clean, what of the One who

fought for us, the One who destroyed death. I have a sneaking suspicion it will be hard to take your eyes off his awesome presence.

And even now as we trudge along towards death, inevitable unless the King comes back first, but even now, lift your heads, look to the Word of the King and how he has come to you in promise, in baptism, in communion! The soldiers, weary from battle, stand tall as the King rides by! Our King even more, for he is risen and promises we will rise too! Death will lose, we will win, he has fought the battle for us. Draw near to the Lord, He will not fail you.