

The Wednesday Word, Mar. 4, 2009: The Gospel and a Good Death: Part 1

"Faith laying firm hold on an unseen Savior, faith resting on the promises of an unseen God--faith, and faith only, can enable a man to look death in the face, and say, "I depart in peace."

JC Ryle

Some years ago a surgeon at a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, approached a well know preacher and said to him, "In the name of God pastor, would you teach your people how to die." The pastor's church was famous for its large, emotionally charged, meetings. Revivalists would stop by on their way through town and 'glory' filled meetings would take place. Excitement and blessings were standard fare, but when it came time to check out, no one knew how to die.

But does anyone really know how to die? Yes indeed, those who know and love the gospel understand how to have a good death. They know that death, the last enemy, is like a giant scorpion, but for the believer, its sting has been removed. As someone has rightly observed, 'Death stung himself to death when he stung Christ!'

The gospel releases us both to live and to die well. However, to both live and die well we need to know that the sin and death problem has really been solved. We need to ask ourselves, therefore, do we actually believe the gospel or is it just a theory for us. Do we, from the depth of our beings, trust that Christ Jesus is the One who has already thoroughly and finally dealt with sin and death (Hebrews. 1:3; 9:26; 1 Corinthians 15:21).

How wise we would be to continually bathe ourselves in the gospel. In the gospel, the Christ event, we discover that the Lord Jesus utterly defeated, disarmed and destroyed all the demonic powers that were displayed against us. He routed, stripped and expelled them in His awesome, sovereign, conquering act at Calvary (Colossians 2:15). If you believe this you will die well. If, however, you have spent your life focused on blessings and experiences you may well have to face death with an impending sense of terror. I have seen this! I have been called to deathbed scenes of church folk who have not been bathed in the gospel. Their church lives had been one of jumping from some new experience to the next. Having been exposed to a steady diet of believer centered preaching--- they were ill prepared to die.

Death is one of the most neglected issues in our churches. Let's face it, none of us like to be confronted with our mortality. Death is a dark and sinister subject for many of us. We prefer to equip ourselves for life rather than death. We don't wave at passing hearses and say 'Great stuff, I'm going to be in there one day.' We have, after all, a God given bias towards life. We were not created to die, but because of sin we all will. We have an unbreakable appointment with the last enemy: we can't dodge it; we must face it. Unless the Lord reTurns, 100% of those reading these words will die.

Many people try to put death out of their minds. One French monarch went so far as to not even allow anything about death to be mentioned in his presence. One day his secretary began to read out the words of a communiqué relating to the recent death of the King of Spain that began, "The death of the king of Spain," Instantly, the French monarch went ballistic saying, "What is that?"

What is that?" He was furious that such a word as 'death' should be mentioned in his presence! The secretary, a past master of diplomacy, then said, " There has been a circumstance which occasionally happens to Kings of Spain."

Some people are just as absurd as that French monarch; they refuse to face the fact that there is no way out of this life alive! So let's say it again, unless the Lord returns, 100% of those reading these words will die. Each one of us should, therefore, ask ourselves, are we preparing to die well!

In the gospel we see God's victory over death; we see that our sins are judged upon Christ, we see Satan exposed and stripped of authority. Because of the gospel, the reign of death has been replaced by the reign of life and grace. Paul tells us,

"For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

He further states,

"That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:21)

To speak of 'reigning' is to speak of Kings and Kingdoms. This is why the believer can say that Christ Jesus has destroyed the Kingdom of Death. By faith we believe and are assured that we have already been translated and transplanted into another Kingdom, the kingdom of God's dear Son (Colossians 1:12). Although, we don't yet see the final manifestation of the rule of Christ Jesus, the gospel declares that God's Kingdom has already arrived in Jesus and that death has been both banished and abolished in Him. This is gospel truth!

Misplaced Love

One of our problems is, however, that many of us are ill prepared to die because we are too attached to this world. We are caught up in all that glitters! This is both a tragic and perilously dangerous state of affairs because the believer has been called to,

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

Furthermore, " If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

(See 1 John 2:15, James 4:4)

The gospel, however, will kill the love of the world and prepare us for a good death. This is one of the many reasons why the gospel of Christ must be kept central in our churches. It will convert us, wean us from the world and cause us to yearn to see the Lord Jesus in all His exalted glory. As Luther said, "if we would only believe this gospel and constantly affirm it in our hearts, we would utterly despise all the pomp and vainglory that this world has to offer."

Fear of Death Removed!

The gospel not only takes away the love of this world and prepares us for death; it also takes away the very fear of death itself. We read,

'that through death he (Christ) might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage' (Hebrews 2:14-15).

When Christ Jesus laid down His life at the cross, He came into contact with the full force of death and absorbed it! He tasted death for us (Hebrews 2:9). He abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). This is excellent news: Satan and his henchman death have been utterly defeated. (See, John 12:31-32, Revelation 12:10, Hebrews 2:14-15). They are conquered enemies! The Lord Jesus has single-handedly overcome these two foes which combined to make a terrifying and monstrous beast. Christ Jesus has abolished death, "The King of Terrors" (Job 18:14), by his all-sufficient work on the cross.

The good news is that Christ has conquered death on our behalf. Of course believers give the undertakers just as much business as the unsaved, but for the believer, death is now a harmless serpent whose fangs have been extracted; it's a frothing mad dog without a bite and a raging bull without horns or legs. Since, in Christ we have already triumphed over death (Ephesians 2:4-6), nothing can give us more boldness in its face than the gospel.

When the gospel is restored to its rightful place in the church, Christians will again learn all that Christ's victory at Calvary means and thus discover how to die well.

And that's the Gospel Truth!