

GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY - Part two

Christmas Eve - December 24th, 5:30 p.m. - 2022

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CHRISTMAS AND THE DESTRUCTION OF DEATH

IPAD TEXT - 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, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

IPAD TEXT - Luke 2:25-32 - "Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. [26] And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. [27] And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, [28] he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, [29] 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; [30] for my eyes have seen your salvation [31] that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, [32] a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.'"

There is a wonderful link between these two passages that we will note now and study later. The words in Hebrews chapter 2 describe a victory over **death** as a work of the Devil and also a victory over the **effects** of death on mankind which are described as **“bondage”** and **“fear.”** The passage in Luke chapter 2 describes a man who can **“depart in peace”** (die) because he has set his eyes on the Christ - the One who our Hebrews text said came in flesh and blood (which was what Simeon was holding in his arms) to **destroy** the power of death over mankind. Simeon can **die** in peace because he has **seen** the **Destroyer of death** with his own eyes. That is the link between these two texts.

But before we unfold this link there are issues in each text that need examining. And we begin with our text from Hebrews chapter two where so many questions beg raising. Perhaps the most obvious of which is ***in what sense has the Devil, with his power of death, been destroyed by Christ? In what sense is the visible earthly scene improved? Where are the marks of victory?***

Look around you. Death rules. Approximately sixty million babies - little pre-born boys and girls - have been killed by abortion just in North America since the “Roe vs. Wade” decision on January, 1973. Senseless shootings fill up every newscast. Alcohol and drugs take a staggering toll every year in human life. We still have no real handle on the major killers like cancer, heart disease, and various others. And then there is the greatest killer of all - more than any disease or war or plague - **time** will eventually get every one of us. No one survives old age. No one is getting out of here alive.

Cemetery real estate is big business. It seems nerve to stare into this mountain of death, pain, and destruction and say that with the coming of Christ - a baby born two thousand years ago - has come the **destruction** of the one who has the **power** of death (Satan) and also, in some way, has come the **deliverance** of the people who live in bondage to the **fear** of death all their lives.

Does the writer of Hebrews intend to say people no longer die? Is that the kind of victory Christ brought into this world with His physical body at Christmas? If this **isn't** the message of our Hebrews text, what **is**? Is there a different **kind** of victory - one which isn't a compromise with death, but conquers it in a different way? And if so, is this a **smaller** victory, or a **bigger** victory?

- 1) **CHRIST'S VICTORY OVER DEATH DOESN'T REMOVE ITS EXISTENCE BUT CHANGES ITS NATURE**

IPAD TEXT - 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, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

The basic teaching points of our Hebrews text are clear enough. Christ came in a physical body (“....***he himself partook of the same things....***” 14). He did this so He could experience death as you and I - who are ***physical*** beings - experience it (“....***that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death....***” 14). Only after physically dying as we die could He then ***rise from the dead in physical body to prove His victory over death in a fashion that relates to us.*** We also need to be raised ***physically*** if we are to experience a genuine victory over death.

The lesson is precious and clear. If Jesus experiences ***resurrection*** - and ***physical resurrection*** at that - after dying physically (as we all must experience death) - and if He then says “***Because I live, you shall live also***” (John 14:19) - then death is not the ***terminus*** it appears to be from ***our*** side of the grave. It can’t snuff us out permanently. Physical death followed by physical resurrection is vastly different from physical death followed by a great black void, an endless soul sleep, or nothing at all.

One other point. This victory over the one who has the power of death - this snatching of the trump card from Satan - doesn't have to manifest itself *immediately* for the victory to be *actual and accomplished*.

I can't prove what I'm about to say with chapter and verse, but I honestly believe there's a reason Jesus *remained* in the grave for three days and nights. Certainly He could have physically died, been buried and then rise from the dead the next day. Nothing in our actual redemption would have been lost.

But in the passing of some *time* in the grave we have a picture of *waiting* for resurrection - even the first and foundational resurrection of our Lord. *Time passes between death and resurrection life*. And this fits in with God's Easter plan. Nothing is lost with this *experience we all share of waiting for resurrection life*. We have proof of this.

Remember, there is nothing else God **still** has to do for this victory to be accomplished. There is no fresh or additional work of God needed to make my future life certain. It is all **done**. He doesn't have to intervene again. He has **already** destroyed the one who has the power over death. People still die. But death has been changed forever and Satan can do nothing to reverse that. Say that sentence over again to yourself very slowly and emphatically. I chose those as carefully as I could. ***Satan can do nothing to reverse Christ's victory.***

But even this point isn't enough. This doesn't capture the scope of the **kind** of victory won by Christ over the power of Satan and death.

2) **THE VICTORY WON BY CHRIST'S PHYSICAL DEATH AND RESURRECTION NOT ONLY PROVIDES IMMORTALITY BUT GRACE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS AND CONFIDENCE BEFORE A HOLY GOD**

I realize you probably all know this. But I want to help, if I can, to make you think about it in a fresh way. Because the **kind** of victory Christ won over Satan and the power of death is tied to more than **future** resurrection. It's also tied to **present** security and confidence.

To put it in the words of our Hebrews text, we aren't just delivered from the darkness and finality of death. We are delivered from the ***bondage of the fear of death (15)***.

We need to unfold that phrase. Let's pretend, just for a moment. Let's pretend Eve and then Adam resisted the temptation of the serpent. In fact, let's pretend the Fall, as described in the Bible, ***still*** hasn't happened. So far, everyone has managed to obey God's commands. So far, everyone has turned Satan's tempting offers down. So far, the curse hasn't been carved in weeds, sweat, and blood over the earth. So far.

Of course, we can't even pretend to know what this world would be like, though much better than it is now, to be sure. How grand our world would be without disease, war, crime, tornados, earthquakes, or mosquitos and dogs that bite. There would be no thieves, muggers, or drug peddlers. There would be no such thing as a locked door of a police officer. It would be easy to conclude we had already received paradise - that things were perfect in every way.

But they wouldn't be. They wouldn't be because we would still be sitting right on the edge of losing it all. We would still be one moral failure away from disaster. We would be in the most insecure position imaginable. And we would **feel** that fear. Knowing what we know about the blazing holiness of God, we would **know** all we had a **probationary** status. Our first mistake would be our last.

Against this imaginary backdrop we can taste the sweetness of the **kind** of victory Christ won over the Devil and the power of death that chained our lives in fear. As **fallen** but **redeemed**, we now live, not on the edge of paradise being lost, but secure in grace for our failure, and with full provision for our eternal joy and security.

Let me put it to you this way. Which is truly the more favorable position - to be **unfallen**, but left to our own unaided energies and devices? Or to be **fallen**, but fully forgiven, fully cleansed and fully united to Christ in eternal life and victory that neither our weakness nor the grave can take away?

This is the genius of Christ's victory. He has returned a thousand fold more than the Devil has taken away. And remember, the Devil can do **nothing** to reverse this!

Now we move quickly to our second text - the story of Simeon at the temple and the presentation of Jesus, the One who came to destroy the one who had power over death:

3) **SIMEON RECOGNIZES THE COMING VICTORY OVER DEATH IN THE PERSON AND CHRIST AND PROCLAIMS HIS READINESS TO DIE IN PEACE**

IPAD TEXT - Luke 2:26-32 - “And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. [27] And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, [28] he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, [29] ‘Lord, *now you are letting your servant depart in peace*, according to your word; [30] for my eyes have seen your salvation [31] that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, [32] a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’”

There is a common belief, though not really stated anywhere in the Scriptures, that our departed loved ones, in some disembodied state, can peer through the veil that separates them from us in ways we can't envision from our earthly view. It may, I suppose, help lessen the gap **we** feel when they are departed from us, but no one knows it happens with doctrinal certainty.

Remember, the Bible talks of those who have died in Christ as being “**with Christ**” and also, in some way, at “**rest.**” I sometimes find it hard to imagine how much **rest** they would get if they had to sit and watch all the blundering, idiotic, and sometimes ungodly things we continue to do down here.

Can you imagine how tawdry our earthly dreams and pursuits would look to those who live in the heavenly kingdom and gaze upon the face of Jesus? I don't think they could stand to watch some of the trinkets they see us giving our worship to while on earth. Just spend an hour on your knees and you can view life very differently. Now imagine unbroken fellowship at the feet of Jesus in heaven and the way **that** would shape our perspective on all the silly escapades of much of life on earth.

Be that as it may, there is perhaps a clue in our text that those who are departed from us **don't** have our earthly frame in view. Simeon senses the clear advantage of seeing the Messiah **before** he passes from this earthly life - as though he **wouldn't** see Christ's earthly life from his place in eternity. After he sees Jesus in the flesh he is happy and ready to “**die in peace**” (29-30).

In other words, it's the **advantage** of seeing Jesus **before** he dies that the passage highlights. Simeon sees something that **prepares** him for death.

I'm not saying the benefits of Christ's death didn't apply to countless Old Testament saints who **never** saw Christ in the flesh. We know better. I'm only saying Simeon is specifically set forth as an example of one saint at the closing of the Old Testament era and the dawning of the New. Simeon knows his time in the presence of Jesus Christ **born in the flesh** is one of fulfillment. And **fulfillment** in Scripture is always better than **anticipation**.

We can't imagine the climb faith had to make before that first Christmas. True, we're **all** saved by faith. But before Christ was born saints not only had to place their faith in the **work** of the Messiah, but exercise faith that such an object for faith would even **come**. They not only had to believe in salvation accomplished by God Almighty, as you and I must believe, but they had to exercise faith that God would one future day take on flesh and blood to become our Redeemer.

Now Simeon **sees** the Redeemer. The praise bursts forth with uncontainable buoyance and passion - **"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; [30] for my eyes have seen your salvation...."** (29-30). - IPAD TEXT

This text is more amazing than a first glance may reveal. Imagine, these are Simeon's words upon seeing nothing but a **baby**. There was no halo. There were no singing angels or shouting shepherds. Just a baby and the leading of the Holy Spirit. We know from the text Simeon has an **understanding** of the death Jesus will die and the scope of the redemption God will bring about for both Gentiles and Jews - "...a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (32). But right now all Simeon sees is a baby.

The point is, we have so much more. You and I have seen the baby grow and love and teach and heal and die and rise again. We have His actual promise to come again to rule over a brand new, perfect creation.

We have seen the full picture. We have seen the victory of the Lamb over the one who has the power of death and the bondage the fear of death brings into our uncertain lives. More yet, we have seen the **grace** of a Savior who, while we were still God's enemies, laid down His life freely to provide mercy and forgiveness for all that would make us unworthy of eternal life. More yet, we have seen Christ's body - that **physical** body - that body **just like ours** - make death work backwards and come out of that grave.

Jesus was thinking along the same lines as Simeon in words that should pound truth into our ears and hearts - **Matthew 13:16-17 -**
“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. [17] Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” - IPAD TEXT

“I can go down to the grave in peace,” says Simeon, “because I have held in my arms God’s salvation - God’s Victor over Satan, sin, and death. The bondage is broken. Having seen the Messiah, there is nothing now to keep me - or you - from dying in genuine confidence and peace!”

Now there’s a Christmas hope you can take to the bank. Joy to the world indeed!