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What Can You Say to Death?

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"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Corinthians 15:55).

The question that is raised in this message is: Do we have what it takes to face up to death? Do you? Do I? Can we meet it head-on with the confidence that we are not death's victims but death's victors?

Years ago, in my reading, I came across a sentence the recollection of which is responsible for the wording of today's topic. The sentence was this: "To say something about death is easy; to say something to death is the test of a valorous faith." Take that sentence and lay it down beside St. Paul's shout of victory in our text: **"O death—the apostle meets death level-eyed—"O death where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."**

Not all men can say a thing so triumphant as that in the very teeth of death. Many of them find that the best they can do is to say something about it. They somehow lack the assurance that enables them to say something to it.

I

Consider then some of the ways in which, indirectly and inadequately, men talk about death. One finds that there are two extremes to which they have a tendency to go.

Going to one extreme, they say, "Death is nothing. Sometimes they say it in a religious and philosophical way. They tell us that mortality, like sin, is only a trick that our morbid imagination plays upon us. They would have us believe that death, along with evil, is unreal, just a fiction of the mind rather than a fact in the universe. And so, with a kind of selfhypnosis, and under the guise of philosophy and religion, some of our fellow beings undertake to handle death.

The other extreme to which men go in talking about death is that of making too much of it. If there are those who shrug their shoulders and say, "Death is nothing," there are others who look out grimly upon the universe and say, "Death is everything." Death, they claim, is the absolute end of the trail for all of us. Death is the end of all things. According to this view it is useless to look for any victory of immortality over mortality, of eternity over time, of hope over despair. Bertrand Russell speaks for this company when he declares that "no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve one individual life beyond the grave."

Death, for such persons, becomes the all-

enveloping, all-consuming finality. It takes you back to the philosophy of the worldly pessimist who cries out in the language of Ecclesiastes, **"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and vexation of spirit."**

Now let us try to be honest with ourselves: Is it not true that both of these strategies for handling death leave us dissatisfied? To talk about it as though it were a mere trifle or an altogether pleasant dream is simply not being realistic. It is a form of "kidding" ourselves. On the contrary, to speak about it as though it were the hopeless "Dead End" street down which all life is moving, this certainly gives the lie to all our finest hopes and longings, all our highest experiences and capacities. Besides, it doesn't fit us for facing death eye-to-eye and saying something to it. Must we be forever content to talk about it? Is there no rock of faith upon which we may stand and shout some clear defiance straight at this tireless destroyer who wears a black hood and tramps ceaselessly through our land? Thank God, there is. Let us turn to look at it for a moment.

II

To put it bluntly, Jesus Christ offers men a faith that enables them to acknowledge the reality of death and at the same time to insist upon the finality and victory of life—life in and through Himself. It is that faith which expresses itself so triumphantly and invincibly in the leaping words of our text: **"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"**

Paul, in this tremendous Resurrection chapter from which we are quoting, takes three views of death: (1) death as we see it in the experience of Jesus, (2) death as we face it in our human experience, and (3) death as finally overcome and swept away through the resurrection of the body.

Take the death of Jesus and look at it with me, says Paul. As you look at it, remember that it somehow stands related to the whole frightful business of human sin. Then remember that sin is **"the sting of death."** If there had been no sin, there would have been no death. Death is part of that tragic disaster that has befallen God's world through man's pride and rebellion. If the vicious circle of sin can be broken, if salvation to a new life of harmony with God is possible, then death will have had a mortal blow struck at it.

Now lift your eyes to this Jesus on the Cross. He claims to be man's Saviour. He claims to be God in human form. He says that He will verify His claims by laying down His life and—here is the staggering thing—by taking it again. What about it? Did He make good or did He not? If His death was the end,

then, says Paul, quite openly, we have no Saviour. **"If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."**

But Paul is sure that death was not the end for Jesus. He is sure because, with that keen mind of his, he has examined the evidence of the witnesses. He is convinced that the evidence is clear and overwhelmingly sufficient to satisfy every honest soul. Hence he boldly declares, **"But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept."**

Then Christ is the Saviour He claims to be. Then sin has met its Conqueror. In humble, sin-confessing penitence you and I can say, "My soul is free: for me, Jesus Christ broke its fetters. My soul is pardoned and washed: for me, Jesus Christ shed His blood. My soul is no longer estranged from God but is in tune with God: for me, Jesus Christ made peace, and now my reconciled heart sings out the joy of oneness with the God of light and love."

If you can say that, cries Paul, then for you death has lost its sting. For you death wears a new aspect. For you it is true that **"neither death nor life, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."** Thus you can say, **"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"**

This leads naturally to the second view of death that Paul takes as a Christian. He looks at it as the personal experience that must come, soon or late, to each of us, save only those believers who will be alive when Christ returns. To describe the believer's own death, Paul reaches into the vocabulary of the Holy Spirit and brings out a word for death that he got from Jesus. He gives us the word "sleep." Four times over, in varied form, he uses this term to describe the event that brings our Christian pilgrimage to its earthly close. Some of our brethren, says he, are **"fallen asleep."** **"Fallen asleep in Christ"** is the phrase he employs in verse 18, while in verse 51, he assures us that we **"shall not all sleep."**

It should not be difficult for us to understand the meaning of this simple figure of speech. Sleep, as we know it here, is the body's rest, refreshment and renewal. Very well, **"asleep in Christ"** means rest for the soul that is made to pass through the experience of death. Rest from pain and weakness! Rest from noise and strife! Rest from care and uncertainty! Rest from storm and strain!

There is one more look at death which the

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