

The Last Enemy is Death

Proper 29

Pastor Josh Frazee

1 Cor. 15:20-28

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Death is the last enemy. What does Paul mean by writing that? Luther wondered that same question; and in his commentary on the passage, he gave a well-worded answer. Here's what he wrote:

"(W)hy does Paul call death 'the last enemy'? Or, what other enemies does Christ have? We commonly speak of three enemies that are both Christ's and ours: world, flesh, and devil, which we feel and understand. In Rom.8:7 St. Paul says: 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.' Therefore God will destroy it with its avarice and care, as he says 1 Cor. 6:13. Thus it is also certain that God will destroy the world. He has already ordered a fire in which it will be consumed and dissolved, as 2 Peter 3:10 tells us. In like manner He has also sentenced and condemned the devil to eternal fire in hell, for he is God's worst and chief enemy, who instigates every adversity and evil against God's kingdom with lies and murder, also with terror, despair, and unbelief. God has these three foes, all of whom act and contend against Him. He in turn fights against them and arrays His whole kingdom solely against them. With His Word, Sacrament, and Spirit He holds the flesh in check. With these He also repels the devil and his venomous suggestions and all sorts of temptations, and also the world with its raging.

"But in addition to these there are also other greater enemies, namely, the Law, sin, and death, by which Christians are harassed the hardest. Without these the other three would be unable to do anything. For if sin and death did not exist, both world and flesh would have to leave us alone. These are the real enemies. They beset us the worst, and it is through them that the others oppress and harass us. For 'the power of sin is the Law' (1 Cor. 15:56) and, as St. Paul declares (Rom. 4:15), 'the Law brings wrath.' He calls it 'the bond which stood against us with its legal demands' (Col.2:14). And Moses he calls a servant and preacher of death and his law a law of sin, which does nothing but reveal how evil man, flesh, world, and devil are (Rom. 4:15; 7:8, 23). Otherwise we would know nothing of sin, as Paul states elsewhere (Rom.4:15): 'Where there is no law there is no transgression.' But where sin stands revealed, the Law renders this sin great and grave. And then when sin is felt, it immediately brings death in its train.

"Those are the real enemies that St. Paul mentions by name here and cites from the text 'till I make your enemies your footstool, etc.' (Ps. 110:1). But death is called the greatest and last enemy because all the others point to him; and even when we rid ourselves of the others, death still remains and holds us captive (Luther's Works Vol. 28)."

So death will continue to have an effect on us after the others; that's why it is named the last enemy. But how does Paul come to this point? Let's turn back to the start of our text.

Verse 1

Just before our text, Paul had written that "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Our entire faith would indeed be worthless and all those who mock us would be justified in their mockery if we worshipped a dead Savior. "But in fact," Paul wrote, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man also has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Most people can see Jesus as a great healer or as a prophet or as a good man. Somehow they have less trouble with Him curing people of their illnesses than that He was God in human flesh. But one of the things people have the hardest time believing is that Jesus was raised from the dead. Today many claim that because

no one has come back from the dead in these times that Jesus' resurrection must be a fable or a cover up. The idea of a resurrection from the dead is so hard to believe that the Sadducees, some of the leaders of the Synagogue at Jesus' time, did not believe in it.

People today like to think that sins are imperfections that can be overcome by counseling and hard work. Well, some sins—other sins they view as normal and socially acceptable now. People also think that the devil is nothing but a man in red tights with horns who is the figment of others' imaginations. And people desire to have the best of both worlds: being rich and famous but also being quote-unquote "good enough" to get into heaven.

While each of these are problematic ways of thinking from a faith point of view, people cannot get past the final enemy with words and happy thinking. There is no way around death. People can refuse to believe every other part of Christianity, but they know that death is real. Their loved ones have experienced it, and they know that someday, they, too, will have to experience it. Whether they believe death came as a result of Adam and Eve's first sin, they know that death cannot be avoided. For those of us in Christ, however, we have already faced death.

Verse 2

"But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet."

Since Jesus has burst from the tomb, having been raised from the dead, those who follow Him and are baptized into Him have already conquered death in one respect. Paul wrote in Romans that each of us who have been baptized have been baptized into Christ's death. You and I have already died. We are new creations.

Just as Christ has come out of the tomb, destroying death's power to hold us forever, we know that death will not be able to hold us forever either. His power has been cut off. We may die for a time, but we know it will not be forever. At Jesus' Second Coming, all who belong to Him will be raised from the dead, just as He was.

Do not doubt that this is true, dear friends in Christ. That's exactly what Satan and even death desire—for you to believe that they still hold their power. They no longer have any power over us in our Lord Jesus, so don't begin to think that they do.

Yes, Satan still has the ability to tempt us right now; and death still has the power to take the life from our bodies—but not our souls. But—but—their days are numbered. God has already told us through His Word that Satan's days are numbered. When Jesus returns, the devil will be cast into the lake of fire where he and his followers will burn forever without end. And they will no longer have any means of tempting us or affecting our lives. And on that Day when Jesus returns, He will raise everyone from the dead—taking the rest of death's power from him until death himself is dead. Death's power is in keeping us dead; yet in Christ our Lord, that power is no longer there. Death has to relinquish us to Christ because death has been subjected to Jesus and made into His footstool.

Verse 3

As it mentions toward the end of our text: "“God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”"

We've already covered how death is in subjection to Jesus; we haven't covered the significance of this point. Paul pointed out earlier that Jesus was the Second Adam—the one bringing life rather than death. Going back to what God commanded of Adam, He had told Adam to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over...every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1a:28).”

Jesus has fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies, and is the fulfillment of this command as well. God is currently putting all things into submission, subduing all the world under His Son's feet. God had commanded this of the first Adam; and now we find it being fulfilled in the new Adam, our Lord Christ Jesus.

Many people today don't believe or doubt God's Word. In the words of Luther: “But if we believe, we have this consolation here that we have a Lord who can and will do away also with this last enemy, tear his fetters and bonds to pieces, and furthermore slay and exterminate him. Since He now vanquishes and subdues the other enemies, so that flesh, devil, world, sin, and Law cannot overpower us, we must not doubt that He will surely rid and free us also from the last enemy. Otherwise He would not have effected anything so far; then all the rest would be in vain (Luther's Works, Volume 28).” Scoff as they like, the people of the world cannot overcome death. In our Lord Jesus Christ who has been raised from the dead, we already have. In Jesus' Name. Amen.