

## **The Death of Death**

*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Heb 2:14-15)*

Five hundred years before Christ, the Chinese military strategist wrote a book which is still studied around the world, entitled *The Art of War*. In its thirteen chapters, the author Sun Tzu, discusses everything from plans to maneuvering an army, from dealing with terrain to gaining tactical advantage. In one of the chapters, Sun Tzu mentions the art of using your enemy's own tactics to defeat him. It takes a brilliant tactician to defeat your enemy using their weapons and their plans, but it has been done. When an army learns of their opponent's plan to ambush them, and instead lays a trap to ambush the ambush, this is using your enemy's tactic against him. When one of David's mighty men, Benaiah, fought with an Egyptian, he managed to wrestle that Egyptian's spear from his hands, and killed him with his own spear. Haman wanted to see Mordecai hanged on a gallows, and once Esther exposed his treachery, he was hanged on the gallows he had built.

But these examples of using your enemy's tactics or weapons point to the greatest battle of all, the ultimate art of war. They point to a battle raging from before Adam and Eve had begun to cultivate the Garden. It is the battle behind all the battles on Earth, the fight between good and evil that goes before and behind all earthly battles for good and evil, it is the war that is the most ultimate war of all – the war between the Creator and His adversary Satan.

The Sunday of Christ's Resurrection is the day in which we see God's flag planted on the castle of creation. We could say that from the point of view of someone watching the human drama unfold, it was not clear how God would win, and if He would win. But on Resurrection Sunday, the Hallelujah chorus can ring out, because it becomes clear who has won the decisive battle, and so who will win the war.

This text in Hebrews tells us why. It is part of a larger section, dealing with why Christ is superior to angels, and why He is a qualified High Priest. But in these two verses, we find a beautifully concentrated summary of the war between God and Satan, and how God won and will win.

In it, we'll see the three stages of the battle – how Satan used death to rule man, how the Son used death to redeem man, and how sinner must use His death to be released.

### **I. How Satan Used Death to Rule Man**

*“him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”*

Our text tells us here of the devil, who had the power of death, and who held people in bondage through that. So to step back, we ask, how did that happen? Who is the Devil? How did he get this power of death?

Thousands of years ago, a powerful spiritual creature fell into darkness. We don't understand where his sin came from, but we know sin was found in him, not placed in him. At some point, pride entered his heart, and he went from being the Anointed Cherub to being the Adversary, the Enemy, or *satan*. Once he fell, his influence was great enough to draw with him a huge host of angels. Once fallen, it seems he set his sight on the crown of God's creation, Man. Man was made in God's image, and if he could have man join him in his rebellion, then God would have a dilemma. He

would either have to destroy the creature made in His image, which would mean creation was a failed project, or He would have to accept man, along with Satan, in His rebellion, which would also mean creation would be a failed project. Either way, Yahweh would cease to be God, for a God whose projects fail is not omnipotent, and a God who fails to judge sin is not holy. In mankind, Satan would either have a reason to be accepted as an equal, or it would be a means to defeat God altogether.

So he came into the Garden in the Hebrew, as a *nachash*. The Hebrew root of *nachash* in noun form is a serpent, in verb form is a deceiver, and as an adjective it means shining one. His goal was to get mankind into the state he was in – separated from God. God had promised Adam and Eve that if they sought independent life – the life of determining good and evil for themselves, autonomous knowledge of the world, it would be death.

*"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen 2:17)*

In dying you shall die, God said. You will die immediately, and continue to die, and keep dying forever. But Satan had a different gospel.

*4 Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.*

*5 "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:4-5)*

His good news said, "You are already dying, because God is withholding from you the life of a god. God has deceived you about dying if you eat of the tree. If you take that act of independence, you will truly begin to live."

Eve placed her faith in Satan. She accepted Satan as her saviour from the life God gave her. She believed his gospel. She broke with God's authority, and she broke with Adam's choosing to act without submission. Whether Adam was watching passively and allowed this, or whether he came on the scene too late, and then chose to rather join her in sin than lose her in death – either way, Adam chose Satan's version of life over God's.

But the moment they ate, they felt the death. Before they ate, their life in God made them focused on God and one another. Life was joyfully upward and outward. And now as that life died, suddenly life was entirely inward. The first thing they noticed was their nakedness. Self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-protection overtook them, and they felt shame, vulnerable, exposed. They felt guilt, and shame, and wanted to be covered, hidden – from each other, and from God. They knew they had been deceived. They had begun to die.

When God came looking for them, He asked why they had eaten, and they each blamed someone else. God pronounced judgements on them all, including Satan. But then mixed into the judgement, He made an announcement, a prophecy of hope.

*15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." (Gen 3:15)*

He said, from the woman will come a snake-crusher, a dragon-slayer. A man will be born, and though Satan will harm Him, and wound Him, ultimately the Man would decisively crush the snake.

Now I think at that point Satan knew that someone was coming who would attack him. But whether or not he fully knew at this point, I doubt. At this time, Satan truly was the god of this world, holding people in slavery of his system.

How did this work? Having tricked man into following him, man now faced a mortal life. Death

became the one certainty of life. Death became the universally shared experience of all men. And death became the great mocker, that makes human life seem so futile. Thousands of years later, King Solomon would capture in his book Ecclesiastes why the fear of death rules human life. Solomon mused on what death does to every human pursuit.

### ***Wisdom, Knowledge, Education, Philosophy:***

*15 So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity." 16 For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool! (Ecc 2:15-16)*

### ***Fame, Celebrity, Power***

*16 There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind. (Ecc 4:16)*

### ***Riches***

*15 As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, To go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labor Which he may carry away in his hand. 16 And this also is a severe evil-- Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has labored for the wind? (Ecc 5:15-16)*

### ***Morality, Religion***

*2 All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; To the good<sup>1</sup>, the clean, and the unclean; To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; He who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. (Ecc 9:2-3)*

### ***Civilisation, Culture, Reason***

*18 I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." 19 For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. 21 Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth<sup>1</sup>? (Ecc 3:18-21)*

If death makes life futile, what then must the living do? They must either live furiously, or they must live hopelessly. If death cuts off what you are trying to get in life, then you must either re-double your efforts and try to get as much as you can before the cut-off day, or else you must give up, and retreat into despair and emptiness. As man does this, every sin, every form of greed, lust, and crime emerges. Every form of false philosophy, false religion, false moral system comes out of this as man tries to get more before he dies, or forget that he is going to die. Man either fights against the inevitable with all kinds of sin and false religion, or he just accepts the inevitable with others kinds of sin and false teaching. Drugs, entertainment, escapism, greed, vanity, sexual sin, wars, deception, exploitation, it is all driven by the engine of the fear of death. "Since you're going to die, don't you want to live for this life?" That engine creates a system of belief and practice which the Bible calls the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

But this is the great goal: if Satan could keep them serving his false system of lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, pride of life because of the looming fear of death, they would then do that all their lives, until they die, and then their death would be a spiritual, eternal, permanent death – banishment from God, receding from God, punished by God. To have the whole race fall into this was exactly the goal at the beginning.

Before Christ came, it looked as if man was all his lifetime subject to bondage through fear of

death, and therefore slaves to the world system of Satan.

What did God do? God used the tactic which Sun Tzu described in his book. He used the enemy's weapon against him.

## **II. How the Son Used Death to Release Man**

*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, **that through death** He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*

How could God destroy Satan? He could not simply allow everyone to die, for that would give victory to Satan. He could not turn back the curse of death without illegally pardoning sin. That would also give the victory to Satan.

God had to destroy death, by destroying the cause of death – sin. But the only way to destroy death would be with another death. A very special kind of death. Now the problem God has when it comes to death is that it cannot touch Him. 1 Timothy 6:16 says that God alone has immortality. God cannot die.

But our text tells us that Jesus shared in the flesh and blood of human beings. In the Incarnation Jesus took on full human nature. He did not wear it like a cloth on the outside. He was fully joined and united to it, so that human nature is now as much a part of God the Son, as your blood and bones are a part of you.

So now God the Son had two natures completely united without mixture, dilution, or distortion in one Person. One person who is completely God and completely man. Now being a person with a true human nature, He could die a death. But being fully God, and being born of a virgin, He was not a sinner.

So there was no death looming over his life. He owed death nothing. So when you have someone who does not deserve to die, does not have to die, who then voluntarily offers himself up to die – what do you have? An innocent death. A holy death. A righteous death. You have as it were, an illegal death, a payment which is not owed. Like overpaying for something, which is then a credit in your account. When Jesus gave up His life, and died a death He did not owe, that became a credit death. But the worth, the value, the merit of Jesus' life was not simply one human. Being God in the flesh, the worth of His life is infinite. So now the Person of God the Son dies voluntarily, and you now have Death sending back the bill, saying, not only do you not owe anything, you have a credit in your account of billions upon billions of lives.

That's why He could not stay in the grave. As Peter put it in his sermon

*whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. (Act 2:24)*

From that holy death, came resurrection, vindication. Here is the first Man that death rejected, that the grave spat back out, that the ever hungry pit could not stomach. A perfect man, whose death was not a debt he owed, but a gift He gave.

The first Adam grasped for his own life, sinned and brought all into captivity of death. The second Adam comes, lives perfectly, and then gives up His life, bringing freedom.

*For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) 18 Therefore, as*

*through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. 19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:17-19)*

Now every sinner can come to God, and receive the gift of life because the death and resurrection of Jesus have paid his penalty of death, and provided new life in its place. So what Jesus has done is fight Satan by using Satan's greatest weapon, death, and turned it around. Jesus did not live in bondage to the fear of death. Instead, living sinlessly, He embraced death, and it became the way out of death. He sat in the electric chair, and short-circuited it. He went to the gallows, and hung, collapsing the gallows with Himself. As if in wrestling with Satan, if Satan had him in a headlock from behind, Jesus took Satan's own sword, plunged it through his own heart, until it came through it stabbed Satan.

See, once Jesus has risen, the fear of death for a believer is gone. In Christ, the fear of both the first death and the second death is removed. We no longer fear the first death. Christ's death and resurrection means that our sins die with Him, and so our eternal death dies with Him.

*so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit (Phi 1:20-22)*

Now if you do not fear the first death, then you are free from living either furiously or hopelessly. Satan's lie that you must live for this life no longer has any hold on you. The world system is obviously false and shallow once you have the hope of eternal life and resurrection. The harsh truths of life under the sun from Ecclesiastes no longer bother us, when we are under the Son. And the reason you do not fear the first death is because Christ's resurrection guarantees that the second death has no hold on you. If Christ is raised, then He is vindicated. If you are in Christ, then the same verdict will be pronounced on you, and so the same thing will be done to you.

*11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (Rev 2:11)*

*6 Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Rev 20:6)*

Your life will be continued, but continued in glorified form. In light of that, whatever you give up becomes not a loss, but a gain.

*7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phi 3:7-11)*

Who would have imagined that the way God would deal with death was by dying? God the living, embracing the opposite of Himself, death, and by dying a holy death, forever disarming death. Satan is destroyed, in the sense that he is rendered powerless. He can no longer hold the axe over men's heads and so bully them into living for his system.

So the race of Adam now has a choice.

### III. How Sinners Should Use Death to Return to God

15 and **release** those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

The Lord Jesus through His death and resurrection, releases captives. The first Adam brought bondage, the second Adam brings freedom. *20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. (1Co 15:20-22)*

But this is the amazing thing about this battle. Man has the choice today, to re-enact the Garden of Eden, and side with the first Adam, or to re-enact the Cross, and side with the Second Adam.

How do you re-enact the Garden? You believe Satan, that this life is all there is, that you can't trust God's Word, that you had better live for yourself, and live independently, and get all that you want out of life, because you only go around once. So you must grasp for life, hoard it, even though you know it is steadily leaking out of you every day, but cling to your own life. Decide for yourself what is the good life, become your own standard of good and evil, suppress the truth you know about God, and worship and serve your own life. And the world will tell you that you are free, but you are in hard, unrelenting slavery to your fear of death.

Or you can re-enact the Cross. Do you know which saying of Jesus is quoted in Scripture more often than any other? It is His most repeated saying, the words the Holy Spirit saw fit to repeat six times, in all four Gospels. *25 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.*

At the Cross, Jesus the Innocent did not hang on to His life, He gave it up, and it became the death that pays for all other deaths. And then Jesus rose, receiving back His life. Every human who gives up living this selfish, satanic, worldly life, who lets that die, who is willing to lose that independent life, and who turns to Christ, and says, let your death be my death, and let your life become my life is believing in Christ. He is accepting Jesus, repenting and believing in the Gospel.

When you do that, you join the race of the second Adam, Jesus. Physical death is no longer a horror. Why? *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal 2:20)*

We can have the Garden, or the Cross. We can have the first Adam, or the second. We can have Satan as our lord, or the Son as our Lord. We can choose death, by hoarding life, or we can choose life by embracing Christ's death.

There are no other choices, for there is no other battle greater than this One, between God and Satan. God has won, by using Satan's lethal weapon, death, to win the war. Choose Christ, the Risen, Conquering King.