

THE DEMISE OF DEATH

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

by Steve Zeisler

Have you ever had the experience of seeing yourself clearly in Paul's words in chapter 7 of the book of Romans? When I first became a Christian I regarded the New Testament as wonderful truth, although parts of it were unintelligible to me. But when I read Romans 7, I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought to myself, "I understand this. I know exactly what this is talking about." I had found in Paul's statement something in the Bible that absolutely squared with my own experience: "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body waging war with the law of my mind."

Here was Paul, the great apostle, admitting that he knew what was right to do but being unable to do it. His words overwhelmed me because I knew exactly how he felt. All my life I had loved what was true and right, yet I found time and time again that I was unable to do what was true and right. I was baffled to discover that mere knowledge of the truth was not enough; something else was necessary. Unearthing that phenomenon in the Bible meant a lot to me as a young Christian.

Why is it that we are weak in the face of temptation? Why are we prone to fall when we are confronted by the wiles of the devil? Why do we do things we know are not good for us, and seem powerless to resist things we don't even agree with? And what help can we receive from the Lord in facing these situations? Let us seek to find answers to these questions in Hebrews 2. This chapter is the most profound explanation of human nature I know of. If you want to understand humanity, the advantages, the difficulties and the destiny of the race of Adam, then Hebrews 2 is where you will want to center your attention.

In our last study we saw that mankind is of inestimable value to God. God loves us so much he became human in the person of Jesus Christ in order to share our human experience and save us. Could there be any greater proof of his love for us? Jesus Christ has gone before us as our older brother and he is not ashamed to call us his brothers. As we study this second chapter of Hebrews we will discover that God is saying repeatedly that we matter very much to him, that we are significant, that it is a magnificent and wonderful thing to be human. Without God, man cannot find meaning or significance in life. Only in the gospel do we hear about God's commitment to us and love for us.

In the passage before us we see what Christ has done to rescue us, to win back for us the crown of glory and honor which we lost through our rebellion in Adam. He has made us what we ought to be, strengthening us so that we do not have to do what is poisonous and death inducing in life, upholding us so we do not have to give way to the temptation to sin. How has Jesus Christ achieved this? Hebrews 2:14-18:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

Jesus' death on our behalf accomplished two wonderful things. First, his death undermined the power of the devil. Jesus did battle with the evil one and won us back from our enslavement to the wiles of the devil. Then, in Hebrews 2:17, we see that Jesus ministers in our behalf in the presence of God regarding the "things pertaining to God." So on the one hand we see that Jesus has overcome the power of the devil, while on the other hand we see that he ministers in the presence of God in our behalf. In both instances the Lord brings life to a people in desperate need of it. Thus it is the death of Christ that is in focus in these verses.

"The children [we human beings] share in flesh and blood." This reference to our bodies speaks of our mortality. Our physical bodies, our flesh and blood, are doomed to die. Adam was created a physical being. Had he not rebelled, flesh and blood might not have become synonymous with mortality, but because of his rebellion, our bodies begin to die from the very moment of our birth. The process of growth eventually reverses and becomes the process of deterioration. But in the incarnation Jesus Christ took on a body of flesh and blood. He became one of us, and he willingly became a victim of death, just like us. His death, then, became our unique hope for avoiding the penalty of death ourselves. In his commentary on Hebrews, F. F. Bruce says this about the death of Christ:

If ever death itself had appeared to be triumphant, it was when Jesus of Nazareth, disowned by his nation, abandoned by his disciples, executed by the imperial might of Rome, breathed his last on the cross. Why, some had actually recognized in his cry of pain and desolation the complaint that even God had forsaken him...If ever a cause was lost, it was his; if ever the powers of evil were victorious, it was then. And yet—within a generation his followers were exultingly proclaiming the crucified Jesus to be conqueror of death and asserting, like our author here, that by dying he had reduced the erstwhile lord of death to impotence. The keys of death and Hades were henceforth held in Jesus' powerful hand, for he, in the language of his own parable, had invaded the strong man's fortress and robbed him of his spoil.

Through the death of Christ we are enabled to deal with our fear of death. His death is the means by which our sins are paid for and we can go boldly into the very presence of God. His rescue operation on our behalf cost him his life, but it rewarded us with life.

Now let us consider the two things I mentioned earlier: the power of the devil, and the "things pertaining to God." Jesus' death confronts head-on the enemy who tempts us by playing on our weaknesses and making us slaves to what is wicked. Why is it that we know we should act in a certain way and yet we seem unable to do so? Here in these verses we have a compelling answer to that dilemma.

Let us think critically about the statements made in Hebrews 2:14-15. There is a logical progression here that will help us. Jesus partook of flesh and blood and thereby had to die "that through death he might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil." The Revised Standard Version says, "...would destroy him who had the power of death." The word "destroy" suggests that the devil has been done away with. But that is not so. A much better translation is the American Standard Version's "...might render powerless him who had the power of death."

Jesus died to take away Satan's great weapon against us—the power to make us do what is harmful to us. Then, the question is: what gives Satan his stronghold, his ability to “subject us to slavery?” Why do we find ourselves doing the very things we hate? It is because we are afraid to die. That is the witness of Hebrews 2:15. As long as we are afraid to die we will find ourselves ready listeners to the siren song of the enemy.

If someone were to offer to sell me heroin, I would not be tempted to buy it. Resisting that temptation would come easily for me. But if I were a heroin addict, it would be quite a different story. Heroin addicts need heroin. They are fearful of the consequences of not having it—the physical and psychological pain, the withdrawal symptoms. They know for certain that if they do not have their heroin shot they are going to pay a tremendous physical and emotional price. And as long as they are afraid they will find the offer of what is poisonous and destructive to them something they will gladly accept. That is exactly how the evil one plays with our minds. So long as we are afraid to die we will accept his substitute—the sham that he offers in place of life. So long as we are afraid to die we can be readily convinced that what he is offering us is to our advantage.

Now think even a little more critically for a moment. These verses are not talking only about physical death, the time when our hearts stop pumping, our brain waves cease, etc. Most of us don't care to think about death. Even life insurance commercials on television must almost disguise their message so sensitively lest they approach the subject. We know we have an approximate number of years left to us, so we do not think about our own physical death.

But if we accept the biblical witness, death is a much more profound notion than that; it is a much deeper and more all-encompassing term. If we look at death in light of this, here is what the writer of Hebrews is saying in these verses: The notion of our own death strikes us as terrifying on many, many levels. The thought of death is so abhorrent to us, every time we are restricted, inhibited, or denied, we hear a voice saying to us, “You are going to die.” Have you ever become angry at someone else's good fortune? Have you ever asked yourself such questions as, “Why is he healthy and I'm frail? Why am I, a single person who desperately wants to be married, surrounded by happily married couples?” We become resentful and angry because we feel that life is being denied us. And behind those feelings, of course, is playing the theme of our own death. We are outraged at being denied something, and that lack reminds us that eventually we are going to lose everything.

This is what we are made aware of every time we are restricted, every time we are denied something, every time we find ourselves in a rut. We hate being told what we can and cannot do. How we hate being told, “Thus far, and no farther.” We hold grudges against those who would deny us certain things and we feel deprived and closer to death as a result. The experience of being inhibited, being told “no” is a form of death. It is just another reminder that someday it will all end. So we hate and fear restrictions. We become unwilling slaves of the evil one who makes us an offer at precisely the point at which we are afraid.

What do you think gives rise to the mid-life crisis? Why do 45-year-old men who had been responsible in all aspects of their lives suddenly act in a bizarre fashion? They forsake marriage and home, in some cases running off with a woman younger than their youngest child. They wear outrageous clothes and buy fast cars. What creates that kind of pressure to return to childhood if it is not the thought in the back of their minds that says, “Why am I on this treadmill? There must be more to life than this?” That is when the devil is ready to offer his illusions: “This sexual dalliance will prove that you are still a man, that you are still attractive.” Thus we become slaves of the wicked one who deceives us to believe that youth is still within our grasp. Why do some people undergo painful and expensive cosmetic surgery in an effort to regain their deteriorating good looks? In many cases it is because the wicked one is telling them that he can offer them life and youth

again. So we become slaves. As long as we fear death the offer of the wicked one for relief from our fear is tantalizing and powerful.

At times what the devil offers is anesthesia: alcohol and drugs. We don't have to think if we're in a stupor most of the time. We don't have to read the signs that life is slowly being drained from us and that death is beckoning. Most compulsive behavior is the devil's way of soothing our fears that the inevitable is going to happen. Even if we don't fully believe the lie, at least we are drugged into not thinking about consequences.

A new compulsion of our time is what I call VCR madness. On any given week there are six ball games, three movies and a bunch of specials that you simply have got to see. The fact that nobody could possibly watch all that television doesn't enter your mind, of course, so you tape everything on your VCR. Pretty soon you have a mountain of tapes begging for your attention. The pressure builds: "The world is passing me by. Everybody gets to watch this stuff but I don't." The very pile of tapes in your library is mute evidence that you can't keep up. Slowly but surely that translates into the realization that you are limited, and that in turn is a reminder of the final limitation that confronts us. So we spend money foolishly. We do things that we are ashamed of, indulging in compulsive behavior in spite of ourselves. And underneath everything is fear: fear that each little restriction, each little limitation, each little denial, each little experience of being left out ultimately points to evidence of the greatest limitation of all—death.

But the death of Christ answers the fears of our heart by which the devil seeks to enslave us. If we are genuinely unafraid, if we genuinely believe that whatever restrictions we must suffer ultimately do not matter, then the offer of something to replace the fear of death is rendered powerless. We can live with what we have; we don't have to keep up with our neighbors. Finally, even our own impending physical death does not overly concern us because on that day we will enter into glory. As we are able to believe that Jesus' death is the answer for our need, as we increasingly lay that truth alongside our compulsions, our fantasies and foolishness, we will find freedom. Restrictions will no longer matter. There is only an interim left anyway. We are to be "crowned with glory and honor." We are to reign with Christ. His death means that we do not need to fear death. Thus the devil does not have any power over us.

What a magnificent announcement, that the death of Christ would do this for us! In Hebrews 2:16 we are told "assuredly He does not give help to angels." Human beings are greater than angels because God has come to rescue mankind in Christ. He became man and died for us, and his death means we do not need to fear death any longer. John White has written this about the death of Christ:

Do you not understand? The Father does not welcome you because you have been trying hard, because you have made a thoroughgoing confession or because you have been making spiritual strides recently. He does not welcome you because you have something you can be proud about. He welcomes you because his Son died for you. I have no words that do justice to the love that led to the death of God's Son. The universe ought to have stopped in its tracks, and I, for one, am sorry it didn't. No more heinous crime was ever committed against God nor greater act of love consummated on behalf of the criminal... "It is finished!" he cried. Completed. Done. Forever ended. He crashed through the gates of hell, set prisoners free, abolished death and burst in new life from the tomb. All to set you free from sin and open the way for you to run into the loving arms of God.

In 2 Timothy, Paul writes of the "grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." What a magnificent statement! Jesus Christ abolished death, ground it under his heel and refused to submit to its

authority. He has given us life on this earth, and promises us immortality forever. It is through the death of Christ that the victimization of death, which allows us to be enslaved by the devil, is done away with.

Now the writer of Hebrews goes on to speak of the “things pertaining to God.” Having looked at the devil and his power, he turns and looks at the face of God. Not only are we susceptible to temptation because we are afraid to die, but we also fear God because of our sins; we run in fear from the God who loves us. But in this Jesus ministers before God on our behalf as well. He not only denies the power of the devil, but opens the way to God:

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation [that word means “payment”] for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:17, 18)

We are afraid to come to God because we feel that what we have done is so terrible he will react in disgust and horror. But let us not forget that because Christ became human, we have a merciful and faithful high priest who understands us. He is not disgusted with us. He is “not ashamed to call us brothers.” It is not inexplicable to him that we could be so weak. He understands the power of temptation. He knows exactly what it is like to be afraid. He is aware of the awful force that tempts us and pushes us to do wrong things. We stammer and stutter when we must confess sexual sin, cowardice, family disintegration and such things, but Jesus is not put off by these matters. He knows where they come from. He knows the terrible pressure of temptation to sin.

Jesus is committed to us. He is on our side. He has paid for our sins, and we have free access to God because of him. He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted because he too has been tempted. On one occasion the devil offered him the whole world. He knows what it is like to face the pressure of materialism, a pressure many of us have to live with all the time. He knows how winsome that kind of appeal can be. He even knows what it is like to live with the notion that God hates you, for on the cross his Heavenly Father rejected the sin nature that had overtaken him. No matter what we have to admit to, he knows about it; he has paid for it. We can walk without the hesitation into the presence of God because our high priest is faithful and merciful.

In summary, the death of Christ is, first, the means by which the power of the devil and the fear of our own death is overcome. In our Lord’s death we have the answer to the sales job of the devil that says, “Do this and the hurt will go away.” The hurt is taken away in Christ, and the wonderful consequence is that we are no longer compelled to do what is destructive. Secondly, we have the answer in the “things pertaining to God”—propitiation, payment for our sins, free access to God, the one who understands us. He is not ashamed or embarrassed. “These are my brothers and sisters,” he says, “these are my people.” We are free to go anywhere he is free to go, and we go at his invitation.

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