

THE LAST TO BE DESTROYED IS DEATH

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”

This week is Thanksgiving. The Old Testament Jews also had their thanksgiving festival, too. If you want to read about it, you will find it in Leviticus 23. At the time of the Passover, every God-fearing Israelite was suppose to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This was also the time when the crops were just beginning to ripen. So, before you packed up your family to leave for Jerusalem, you first went into your field or orchard and picked the first ripe sheaf of grain or the first ripe apple or tomato or whatever it may be, and you took it along. This was known as the “firstfruits,” or the first ripe produce from you farm. You would celebrate the Passover on a Thursday evening, observe the Sabbath on Saturday, then the day after, on Sunday you would take your firstfruits to the temple. The priest would wave it as a wave offering before the Lord, thanking him that the harvest is coming. Then you went home to harvest. Now, fifty days later, a day known as the Feast of the Weeks or Pentecost, you went back to Jerusalem. This time you brought a tithe or tenth of your crop and gave it back to the Lord, thanking him for the harvest. In a sense they had a double Thanksgiving, thanking God that the harvest is beginning and later when the harvest is complete.

I suppose we can do the same today if we want. If you are a farmer, you can bring the first ear of corn or the first ripe apple or tomato and bring it to church and we dedicate it to God as the firstfruits. And then, when the harvest is over, you come back with an offering to thank God for the harvest.

Now, what does this mean to us today? Did you catch it how our text called Jesus the “firstfruits?” Jesus is the first to rise from the dead and live forever. That means that more will follow. Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year and we see Christ as our King who is defeating our enemies for us. As the firstfruits, the last enemy he will destroy is death.

I. Jesus saves us now.

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” This passage reveals a lot for us. In the Greek it speaks just a little differently for it says, ***“In Adam all are dying.”*** This means we are all in the process of dying. When you were born, when you were conceived, the clock started ticking, counting down the seconds, minutes, days and years before we die.

And the reason is spelled out for us here, too. Death came to us through one man. We know who he is. In Adam all die. No, death isn’t due to a genetic defect or pollution or intense radiation. This takes us back to Genesis chapter three when man and woman sinned against God. Adam and Eve threw away the image of God and with sin created a new image, the image of man. This is the image we have when we came into this world. As Jesus says, flesh gives birth to flesh. We were sinful from birth, sinful from the time of conception. Yes, one man, Adam, brought this sin into the world, but we have our own sin that deserves punishment.

God, however, reverses all of that. If death came to us through one man, the resurrection comes to us also through one man. If in Adam we die, in Christ we will be made alive. This means, first, that salvation does not and cannot come from you or me or that group of people. It comes only through one individual, the God-man Jesus Christ. Jesus is some ways similar to Adam and us. He took on flesh and blood just like us. He was tempted in every way like us. But he is also completely different. If Adam and all of us are sinners, Jesus had no sin. If Adam and all of us disobey God, Jesus never did. And if Adam and all of us must die, Jesus lives. Sure, he gave up his life on the cross when he became sin, but he took it back on Easter. That is how he saves us.

Friends, this is the gospel. This is what it is all about. It is like identity theft. Identity theft is awful. If someone gets hold of your social security number or bank information, they can ruin you financially and ruin your credit score. Christ is guilty of identity theft, only in a wonderful way. He stole our sinful identity and then paid for our sins with his own suffering and death. And then he took his identity, as holy, and gives it to us. It would be like someone taking your social security number and paying off all your debts and making you rich beyond compare so that you and ten generations after you will never have to work!

II. Then he will destroy death.

And now, because Jesus did that, he destroys all our enemies including death. ***“But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.”***

Do you have a “to-do” list? I can’t function without one. I jot it down on my yellow tablet in the office and on my computer calendar application. I need to put down such simple things like take out the garbage and call this person or that person, to such important things like write the sermon or pay quarterly taxes. God has a to-do list and he is checking off everything. Creation. Check. Man falls into sin so give him the promise of forgiveness. Check. Keep this gospel promise alive throughout history. Check. Send Jesus. Check. Raise him from the dead. Check. Now there is only last thing left on God’s to-do list, destroy death.

That is the only thing left for God to do, and that is the only thing we are waiting for. Everything else is taken care of: Christ has come, our sins paid for, God brought us to faith in him. Now we are waiting for him to return to destroy the last enemy, death. I like the book of Revelation. Read it. In it God shows the Apostle John the history of the church until Christ returns. It is a history of suffering and persecution with enemies like false prophets and unbelievers attacking the church. In it you have disease and death roaming the earth. In it you have hunger and thirst and injustice and pain. All of these are attacking us, but the book simply tells us to hang in there; the Church will not only survive, it will thrive as it only grows bigger and bigger with the passing of each day. All our enemies will crumble. And then death will be cast into the fire and destroyed.

Upon hearing this, John prays at the end, ***“Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”*** Jesus can come tonight. He can come right now. The quicker, the better. All the things we have right now, all our possessions, all our earthly dreams, all that we have or wish to have, they can go away, we don’t care. We gladly give these up because it means our enemies like sin and death and the devil, like hunger and disease, like false prophets and persecutors will be gone. Who wouldn’t want that? Then he destroys the last enemy. Graves will be opened and death will never be something we will ever think about again forever.

We want Christ to come back soon. But what if he waits a little longer? We don’t mind. In a sense, we want him to wait even if it means we might taste earthly death for a short time. We don’t mind it if Christ waits a little bit longer for the sake of those who don’t know Christ yet. You and I want to go to heaven right now, but wouldn’t it be nice to see more and more of our neighbors brought to faith and join us there? And wouldn’t it be wonderful if those who bow down to other gods are lead to the Word and Jesus and believe and can join us in heaven? You bet it would be great. It would be worth suffering a while more in this world.

We can pray that because there is no doubt about our own resurrection. ***“But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”*** Remember, Christ is the first fruits, the first apple on the tree, the first cob of corn in the field. His resurrection means that soon the whole field will ripen and we will all rise in him. As Paul confessed, what are our present sufferings worth compared to knowing Jesus and living with him forever?

Every war has its last battle. In the American Revolution, I think of Yorktown where the British army under Cornwallis surrendered. Were there some smaller battles after that? Sure, but Yorktown was the one that spelled the end of Britain. Christ is our King. The crucial battle was two thousand years ago when he died on the cross and rose from the grave. The devil is defeated. Since then, he has been fighting battles for us every day. But soon, very soon, the last battle will be fought. Jesus is the firstfruits which means graves must open. On that day, death will die and we are all raised to eternal life. So, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.