

Ps 90:5,6
Ps 16:5
Ps 88:1,2,3
Ps 30:1,2,3
Hy 55:1,2,3
John 19:28-42
Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8
Lord's Day 16

Yarrow, March 14, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In the Lord's Day before us this afternoon, the church gives expression to what we have heard God say in His holy Word about *death*. It's a topic about which we'd rather not spend too much time, for we don't like death and so would prefer to avoid the topic. That's the more so because we're largely a young congregation, and so death isn't really much on our minds either.

Yet sober reality presses upon us, brothers and sisters, that death is very much part of life. There is not one of us who will not die – unless the Lord Jesus Christ returns before our time is up. As a matter of fact, there is no guarantee that we as congregation won't have a funeral or two this coming week – and we have no idea today who that might involve. We are foolish, then, to avoid the subject of death, foolish not to learn and believe what the Lord our God has revealed in relation to death.

It turns out that the Lord God has prepared for us some delightful news in relation to the subject of death. So delightful is it, in fact, that Paul can't wait to die....

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

BECAUSE OF JESUS' DEATH THE CHRISTIAN IS CONNECTED AGAIN TO GOD, AND SO NEVER DIES.

1. What is Death?
2. How does one escape from Death?
3. So what?

1. What is Death?

A good look at the world in which we live leads to the obvious conclusion that death is part of existence, for all living creatures die.... Such, we conclude, is the way it's always been, and such is the way it shall always remain. That conclusion in turn tempts one to resign oneself to the inevitably of death; death shall one day take us, and so we'd better make the most of life right now.

In His goodness the Lord God tells us that death has in fact not always been part of human existence. The Lord is the God of life, not of death. He created people to image Him, and that's to say that people were also to *live*, not die. Death, God reveals, entered the world with the fall into sin. It was God's threat to Adam: you may eat of any tree in the Garden except that one; "in the day you eat from it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). In other words, death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). So, after Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, the Lord God carried out His threat; every human born on the face of the earth returns to the dust from which we were taken. "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19). Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him – death (Genesis 4:8). "Adam lived 930 years, and then he died" (Genesis 5:5). His son Seth "lived 912 years, and then he died" (Genesis

5:8). His son Enosh “lived 905 years, and then he died” (Genesis 5:11). It’s the sad refrain of Genesis 5: “and he died, and he died”. That’s the hard reality for all humanity.

We read this material, and form a conclusion in our minds about what death is. Death, we think, is that the heart stops or there’s no more brain activity. That may indeed be a reasonable understanding of what death is from a medical perspective. But that does not do justice to what the Scriptures say about death.

God, I said a moment ago, is the God of life. The point of the phrase is that there can be no life without God; eternal God is the origin of life, and the One who sustains all life. To be *alive* requires that one be connected to this God, that one draw one’s energy from Him. When one becomes separated from God, when one is disconnected from Him, one dies. That explains the connection between sin and death. God is too holy to tolerate sin, and so expels from His presence anyone who gives himself to sin. That, of course, is separation from God, being disconnected from God. So: you sin, you die.

By way of analogy: consider a fan plugged into a power outlet in the wall. The fan turns at so many revolutions per second because of the energy it draws from the power source in the wall. But unplug it, and what happens? We know: it stops turning. Yet it doesn’t stop instantly; it needs 10, 20, 30 seconds to stop turning, depending on its momentum and its lubrication. Even so, the moment the fan is disconnected from its power source, it’s immediately dead; it’s just a matter of time before it loses its wind altogether and peters out.

So it is with death. The moment the human race became unplugged from God –and that’s what the fall into sin was; we broke our bond with God and joined Satan’s side– the moment the human race became unplugged from God we died. Then our fan can keep on turning for a while, but the fact of the matter is that everyone is petering out so that sooner or later we’ll breathe our last. Adam’s fan –may I say it this way– turned another 930 years before he petered out, but die he did. Our fan may turn some 70 years, or 80 if we’re strong, but die we shall. We’ll die because through our fall into sin we’ve become unplugged from the source of life.

This, congregation, is what the Bible means when it speaks about being “dead in ... transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). One is still alive in the medical sense, but death is inevitable because one is disconnected from the source of life – and so is already a *living dead-man*. More, when one is unplugged from God, one in effect gets plugged in to Satan. That’s Ephesians 2:2: the spiritually dead follow “the ways of this world”, follow the ways of “the ruler of the kingdom of the air”, the ways of “the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”. Yet Satan cannot support life, cannot keep your fan turning, let alone turning smoothly, and that leads to a lifestyle of wickedness. One invariably peters out, then must appear before the judgment seat of God, and then receives ones just sentence: eternal death in hell in total separation from the God of life.

It becomes clear: what we need is some way to escape death, some way to be reconnected to the God of life. That’s our second point:

2. How does one escape from Death?

The passage we read from John 19 began with the Lord Jesus Christ already on the cross. He was crucified, we confessed in Lord's Day 15, because our sins were transferred onto Him – and that’s to say that He became sin in our place. After Jesus, according to John 19, had complained of thirst He declared that His work was “finished” (vs 30). “With that,” John continues, “He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (vs 30b). We understand that those words are a reference to Jesus dying.

Yet how, congregation, are we to understand this description of Jesus dying? “He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.” Does this refer to Jesus petering out like that fan, broken and exhausted

by the suffering of His crucifixion? We might think so, but the evidence of Scripture points to something else.

Notice first of all that more men were crucified with Jesus, and they did not die as quickly as Jesus did. That's clear from vs 32; the soldiers broke the legs of the two exactly because they were still alive and spared Jesus because He was already dead. Jesus, then, died *early*. Mark records that when Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body, Pilate was "surprised" that Jesus was already dead (Mark 15:44).

In the second place, notice how John describes Jesus' dying. "He bowed His head," says John, "and gave up His spirit." The point: Jesus was not passive, powerless, a victim that Death could carry away. John puts it in very active terms: Jesus now deliberately "bowed His head and gave up His spirit." That is: He was King (as the sign over the cross also said!), King also over death. Once His task on the cross was "finished" He sovereignly gave Himself to death, decided to die. Jesus, then, did not peter out but deliberately died at this point in time. This, we need to know, is fundamentally significant for the material of our Lord's Day!

How so, you ask? God, brothers and sisters, saw Jesus on the cross as *the Sinner*. Recall: the sins of all God's people, yours and mine included, were placed on Jesus Christ. Though He was Himself without sin, He now became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). But God is too holy to tolerate sin, and so *disconnected Himself from Jesus Christ*. For three long hours thickest darkness prevailed over the land, and that's because God rejected His Son. At the end of those three hours of darkness Jesus cried out His agony: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt 27:45; cf Ps 22:1). That's to say: by God's decision Jesus on the cross was unplugged from the God of life, unplugged from the source of life. It had to be so because the wages of sin is death, death not first of all in the medical sense (as in, your heart stops), but death in the spiritual sense of being unplugged from the source of life.

So this becomes the big question: if Jesus on the cross is unplugged from the God of life, will Jesus' fan slow down, peter out?? Or does He have life within Himself so that He can keep on living even though He is disconnected from God? Yet He cannot have life within Himself if He remains *sin*. He must atone for sin, pay for our sins –how?– by enduring the eternal weight of God's wrath on our sins.

This now is the gospel: after being rejected by God, after being disconnected from the source of life, Jesus did not peter out but He sovereignly, majestically continued to *live*. More, He atoned for sin and then cried out those majestic words: "It is finished!" (John 19:30). With His work on the cross complete (that is, with sin atoned for and sinners reconciled to God), He had no need to linger on the cross as any other crucified person lingered till Death came to take him, but Jesus could now sovereignly give Himself to Death – not as its victim but as its Master. That's the force of John 19:30: "With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit." He did not peter out, as if His being unplugged from God caused His fan to slowly stop turning. Were that the case, there would be no redemption for sinners! Instead, though He was unplugged from God, rejected by the just Judge of all the earth, He had life within Himself, eternal life, and so He could and He did pay for our sins. When that was done, He died, and that's to say that He committed His spirit to His Father in heaven, entered into the presence of His Lord and Father (see Luke 23:43, 46; John 13:1,3).

Here, congregation, is the material of Lord's Day 16.40. Though Christ was true God, He had to "humble Himself even unto death" because "the justice and truth of God" required that "satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God." He had to die, because the wages of sin is death. Yet the death He died could not be simply a medical death, the heart stopping; the death He died had to be first of all that He was spiritually dead, that is, unplugged from God and left to Himself. That's what Question & Answer 44 refers to. His rejection by God was that He

was handed over to hell, to Satan – and then the big question was whether He had life within Himself to fight against and overcome sin and Satan and the powers of hell?! In those three hours of darkness on the cross hell came to Jesus Christ, *and He triumphed* – for Yes, He had life in Himself (cf John 1:4; 5:26; 14:6). So He could die medically, His heart could stop, and Jesus in His spirit could go to the Father in heaven and be welcomed in the courts of God!

That, congregation, is why death is no longer a problem for us. Yet before I work that out in our third point, I need to draw your attention for a moment to Question & Answer 41 of our Lord's Day. The point is that there are those who will insist that Jesus never actually died. They point to His resurrection on the third day, and insist that Jesus was simply in a coma when He was buried. I would not mention this matter if it did not touch on our salvation. But we've seen already: if Jesus had not really died, there would simply be no redemption for sinners.

So, "why was He buried?" Answer 41 says, "His burial testified that He had really died." How so? Could they not have buried a man in a coma? Read John 19, brothers and sisters. The soldiers who came to break the legs of the crucified were professionals; they knew the signs of life. Those Romans had no stake in Jesus' identity; to them He was just another criminal. But they agreed: Jesus was dead. That's the first lesson on the point from John 19. The second is: Joseph of Arimathea and his friend Nicodemus took Jesus' body off the cross, then wrapped it in lengths of linen stripes together with 75 pounds of spices. In the eye of our mind we can see them doing it. You roll out the strips of clothe in a long row, lay the body at one end of it, and wrap the cloth around the body by rolling that body round and round – and all the while pouring 75 pounds of spices into the cloth. My point: if these two friends of Jesus had detected any sign of life, they would most certainly not have proceeded to cart Jesus' body to the tomb and roll a stone in front of it. That they buried Jesus' body is because they, after working with it for the time it takes to wrap up and carry the body, were absolutely convinced that Jesus was dead. That the enormous comfort of 16.41: Jesus was truly dead.

So we come to our third point:

3. So what?

If now, congregation, Jesus died to demonstrate that His victory over sin and Satan, if Jesus could be unplugged from God and instead of petering out could still crush Satan because He had life in Himself, what consequences follow for us??

A passage as Romans 6 is emphatic on the implications. The passage even speaks of 'dying to sin' (vs 2), and the point here is that when one is unplugged from God one in effects ends up being plugged in to Satan as your source for energy. That results in turn, of course, in a style of living that deviates greatly from what the God of life has ordained. Well now, through Jesus' death on the cross the child of God has been unplugged from Satan and been connected again to God – so that God is again ones source of life and energy. Vs 8: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him." Vs 10: "the death He died, he died to sin once for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God." "In the same way," Paul continues in vs 11, "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." How about that! Dead we were because of our fall into sin, unplugged from God and so our fan would inevitably stop one day – death. But because of Christ's victory we're united to God again, plugged into the source of life once more, and so *alive!* We can draw again from His energy and live forever; our fans will never stop! That's the value of faith; faith, if you will, is the cord that connects us to the true source of life, Jesus Christ Himself. So Jesus can put it like this in John 5:24: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me *has eternal life* and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

Notice well, congregation, what Jesus says. He does not say that the person who believes *will* receive eternal life – as if eternal life is what you get when you die medically and your soul appears before God’s judgment seat and God finds faith and so sends you to heaven to live with Him forever. No, according to Jesus’ words, eternal life *is what the believer has already!* How so? The believer has eternal life *as soon as he is plugged in to God again!* Eternal life is reality *now*, for when you’re plugged in to God you cannot ultimately die.

That is why the death of the body, medical death, if you will, is no longer the enemy it otherwise was. Listen to Paul; he is not at all afraid to die. Philippians 1: “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (vs 21). And: “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” than staying here (vs 23). This life, with its tears and pain and struggles, is not as good as it gets; ahead of us, beloved, is something far better than we can ever imagine. And the guarantee that it’s coming is that we, thanks to Christ’s death on the cross, are plugged in again to God today already. That’s why the Catechism can say so wonderfully in Answer 42 that yes, we must still die, but “our death is not a payment for sin” – for Christ made that payment for us. Instead, our death “puts an end to sin” –O glorious day!– “and is an entrance into eternal life” where the phrase ‘eternal life’ here means the delightful presence of God itself. Then holidays can be a nice thing to look forward to and we can even get excited as we make the preparations, but here is something far nicer to look forward to, far more exciting! “To die is gain!”

Meanwhile, God in His providence has us *for now* live on this earth. How would He have us live? With bags packed for heaven, waiting on the front porch for the taxi?? Not so, beloved, not so! The Holy Spirit moved Solomon already to teach his people the glorious consequences of the good news of Christ’s triumph over death. Ecclesiastes 11: “Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all” (vs 7f). And: “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart...” (vs 9). Point? Israel’s covenant youth and the not-so-young of Israel should know themselves plugged in to God on account of the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in their temple. Instead of being spiritually dead, disconnected from God, they are alive and so should enjoy the life God gives!

And no, that does not mean that anything and everything they feel like doing is OK. But it does mean that they are to live from out of their connection to God and thoroughly enjoy that. If one’s energy comes from the God of life, one’s lifestyle will be dramatically different than if one’s energy comes from Satan. Lord's Day 16.43: “through Christ’s death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him, so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us.” Instead, now that we’re alive in Christ we have every reason –and it’s Solomon’s inspired command– to “offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness”, and enjoy doing it day by day. Life for the child of God may not, says the Bible, be a drudge, just putting in time while we await the New Jerusalem. The Lord would very much have us *enjoy* the full pleasures that come with being plugged into Him, drawing on His life, His energy, His strength.

That’s the kind of lifestyle that Paul catches in that pithy little quote from Philippians 1: “to me, to live is Christ.” The Christ who died in my place is the source of my joy and my life, and so Yes, I’ll enjoy the opportunity to serve in His kingdom on this earth as long as the Lord leaves me here. And even as I enjoy this life, says the Christian with Paul, “to die is gain.” And so one is ever ready to depart this vale of tears to be with Christ Jesus Himself in the splendour of heaven – obviously far better!

We like to keep on living on this earth. We tell ourselves that we were created to live, and not to die. Let it all be fixed in our minds, though, beloved, that the death we all need one day to experience is not the enemy it used to be. For the child of God is reconciled to God, is plugged in to God

again, and so medical death is nothing else than a door from one room of God's world (this earth) into another room of God's world (heaven). Then the point of living is not to see children and grandchildren, nor to travel hither and thither or accomplish this or that, but the point of living is to serve the God of our existence in whatever place or manner He prescribes – whether on this earth or in heaven, whether with the body or without. The point is *Christ*, His glory through us. So, “to live is Christ”, and we'll enjoy living as long as God gives life, and “to die is gain”, for then we'll be allowed to serve our Master and Lord perfectly, without the constraints of sin.

For all I know, there shall be a funeral in the congregation this week. Whoever passes on will most certainly be missed, and we'll grieve at the loss. But the confession of the church in Lord's Day 16, brothers and sisters, puts any Christian death in a whole new light, a wonderful light, and puts the lives we're given to live this week in a wonderful light also. To be plugged in to God again so that our fans never ever stop, not even in old age: how wonderful the privilege, what perspective for living!