

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #7

The Death of Death in the Death of the Risen Christ

Hebrews 2:14-18

Today, traditionally known as Easter Sunday, more biblically known as Resurrection Sunday, is all about one theme and one theme only: ***Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, following a sinless and altogether virtuous and obedient life, died a substitutionary and altogether sufficient and saving death, and then rose again to a new life in a glorified but still human body.***

Of course, there are some who will try to convince you otherwise. Easter, so they say, or better still, the season we know as Spring, is instead all about *nature coming out of its winter doldrums*. Easter or Spring is all about *the renewal of hope* and the emergence of all that is green and warm following the depressing brown of death and cold. Easter is about new dreams and a fresh start and new opportunities and we shouldn't muck it up by bringing in religious myths such as the bizarre notion that a man died and literally came back to life. Or so they say.

I hope and pray that you hear me when I say that, if Jesus of Nazareth did not literally and physically rise from the dead on Easter Sunday morning, any talk of hope and renewal and fresh dreams for the future is meaningless, empty, vain drivel at best and silly, destructive, deception at worst. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, the absolute maximum you can hope for, with rare exceptions, is about 100 years of earthly life followed by . . . ***nothing . . . absolutely nothing.***

Life has meaning and value and the human heart has good grounds for hope and happiness for only one reason: ***Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, following a sinless and altogether virtuous and obedient life, died a substitutionary and altogether sufficient and saving death, and then rose again to a new life in a glorified but still human body.*** Why is it important that I stress the fact that Jesus was not just God but also man and that ***he was raised in the same human body in which he lived during his time on this earth?*** To answer that question we need to look more closely at the passage of Scripture before us today.

Let me take just a moment and set this paragraph in the broader context and flow of argument in Hebrews. Some of you who've been with me from the start of this series may be tempted to say: "But Sam, the author of Hebrews says nothing *explicit* about the bodily resurrection of Jesus in this text. For that matter, he hasn't said anything *explicit* about the resurrection since the start of this epistle back in chapter one and verse one.

That's only partly true, and the key is in my use of the word "explicit". The fact is, our author has either implicitly assumed or directly alluded to the resurrection on several occasions. In fact, nothing of what he has said about Jesus up through the end of chapter two makes any sense at all unless one takes for granted that Jesus was raised from the dead.

For example, in **Hebrews 1:3** we are told that "after making purification for sins," a reference to the sacrificial death of Jesus, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." But if he wasn't raised from the dead he could hardly have been exalted by God the Father and could hardly have sat down at the right hand of God. His body would still be rotting away in a Palestinian tomb.

Also, as we saw a few weeks ago, Psalm 2:7, quoted in **Hebrews 1:5**, refers directly to the resurrection of Jesus. There God declared: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." In Acts 13:33 and other passages this OT text is set forth as a prophecy of the bodily resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Then once more in **Hebrews 1:6** our author mentions the time when God the Father will "bring" the Son yet again "into the world," a statement many believe refers to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of history. But if he is still dead and his flesh and bones have long since decayed in a musty middle-eastern tomb, there is no Savior who can come into this world to consummate God's purposes.

And if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead how can our author say of him in **Hebrews 1:8**, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever"? And if Jesus is dead, never more to rise, how can our author say in **Hebrews 1:10-11** that, whereas the natural creation "wears out like a garment" and "perishes" the incarnate Son of God "remains" and is ever "the same"? How can our author say at the end of **Hebrews 1:12** that his "years will have no end" if in fact he only lived 33 of them and then died, never to live again?

If that were not enough to convince you that the author of Hebrews had a robust and passionate conviction about the bodily resurrection of Jesus, how could he say in **Hebrews 2:9** that this very Jesus is now "crowned with glory and honor" and is the one in whom the destiny of

mankind as ruler over all of creation is ultimately fulfilled? And if I may jump ahead to **Hebrews 2:18**, if Jesus is still dead and decaying in a distant grave our author is seriously deluded when he says that this very Jesus “is able to help those who are being tempted.” I suppose there are a lot of things a lifeless corpse might do for me, but help me when I’m being tempted isn’t one of them! Then again, I can’t think of *anything* a lifeless corpse could do for *anyone*!

Of course, our author does quite explicitly mention the resurrection of Jesus in **Hebrews 13:20-21**. There he prays: “Now may the God of peace *who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus*, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

I’m now prepared to answer the question I asked a moment ago: “Why is it important that we stress the fact that Jesus was not just God but also a human being, a man, and that he was raised in the same human, flesh-and-bones, body in which he lived during his time on this earth?” The reason why that is important is because **if Jesus Christ is to save us and deliver us from death he cannot *only* be God, he must *also* be man.** The reason for this is found in Hebrews 2:14-18.

But what do we mean when we say that Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, is also a human being? What do we mean when we speak of the ***Incarnation*** of God the Son? Are we saying that the Second Person of the Godhead did what a lot of human beings do during Halloween, when they pretend to be something they aren’t, when they go about playing make-believe, dressed up as ghosts and vampires and goblins and witches? Is this what God the Son did when he came to this earth? ***Was Jesus nothing more than God in a human costume, masquerading as one of us?*** Was Jesus pretending to be a man when he walked this earth, died on a cross, and rose again from the dead? The answer is a resounding and deafening, No!

The incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth was no masquerade or make-believe. The mystery of the Christian faith is that without ceasing to be God the Second Person of the Trinity actually and factually became a human being! This is what we are being told in our passage today.

Five Fundamental Truths without which We Have No Hope

First, if Jesus was going to save us and reconcile us to God he had to live the life we should have lived and die the death we deserved to die. That is why he had to become human. Only a human being can live the sinless life that other humans failed to live. Only a human being can die in the place of other human beings the death they justly deserved to die. An *angel* couldn't do this for us. No *animal* in creation could do this for us. ***We are humans and only one who is himself a human could serve as our substitute and succeed where we failed and discharge the debt that we owed.***

Therefore, says our author, "since the children [that's us; see v. 13] share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things." Not everyone, of course, takes this to be literally true. In 1977 a group of scholars in the U.K. collaborated on a book titled, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (edited by John Hick). *Their argument is that the incarnation was a mythological or poetic way of expressing the significance of Jesus to our lives.* It didn't really happen, but we speak of it as if it did in order to give Jesus Christ some degree of relevance to our existence.

The author of Hebrews would beg to differ! Again, in 2:17 he says it once more: "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect." Other NT passages say the same thing:

"And the Word [a reference to God the Son] became flesh" (John 1:14a).

"For in him [that is, in Jesus Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9).

". . . every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:3a).

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. The Son of God did not first come into existence when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary and was later born in a stable in Bethlehem. God the Son is eternal. He existed eternally before creation. After all, he was and is God! But since the "children" he desired to redeem and reconcile to himself were human, he became human. He took on human nature, a nature just like ours.

Second, he did this ***so that he could die.*** He himself took on human nature "in order that" he might die. God cannot die. But the God-man can, and did. We are all born in order that we might

live and we die under protest. Death is an ugly inconvenience that interrupts the primary reason we exist. But Jesus was born in order that he might die. His death was the very goal and reason for his human existence.

Third, through his death or by means of dying he destroyed “the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (v. 14b). In some way, shape, or form, and for some reason that is not made explicit here but will be in v. 17, Christ had to die in order to break the grip of Satan off our lives and set us free.

The word translated “destroy” does not mean to cause someone or something to cease to exist. It does not mean to annihilate. Satan, in fact, will live forever; in hell, of course, but forever. The word here means to render powerless; to nullify or dethrone or to render someone inoperative. Thus he is saying that through his death on the cross Jesus Christ has broken the hold which Satan maintained on those who now trust in Jesus for eternal life. He has annulled and overcome Satan’s influence over us.

Consider how utterly contrary this is to many popular ideas of why Jesus came into this world. He did not become human so that we might be absorbed into some sort of mystical oneness with God. He did not live as a human to provide us with a stellar example of what human “goodness” really is. He was not born and he did not live merely to provide an ethical model for how all of us should live or to pay passing tribute to the supreme dignity of the human race. He was born and lived as a human in order that he might die the death that you and I deserved to die and thereby set us free from Satan’s tyranny.

Fourth, this leads us to ask the question: What does it mean to say that Satan held “*the power of death*”? Does our author mean that Satan has the ultimate authority and power to *inflict* or *cause* death? No. That belongs to God alone (see Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6; Psalm 139:16). God is ultimately sovereign over our lives and we die when he wills. Does it mean, then, that Satan has the “power of death” because it was he in the Garden of Eden who persuaded our first parents, Adam and Eve, to sin against God and suffer the penalty of death? No. Does it perhaps mean that he has authority or power over the realm of the dead, that is to say, over hell? No. ***There isn’t a single text in the Bible that supports the idiotic idea that Satan has any control over anyone in hell. He does not punish anyone in hell. He himself will be punished there forever.***

The “power” that Satan exerts over death resides in his ability to instill the fear of it in the hearts of men and women. He terrorizes humans with the prospect of dying and in doing so poisons their lives, turning joy and peace into misery and despair.

But because Christ, through his death and resurrection, has defeated Satan we are set free from having to live in an artificial dream world that denies the reality of death or in a world where we numb ourselves from having to think about it. We can now live in joy and freedom and look death squarely in the face and know that it is only a transition from this lowly existence into the elevated and glorified life of being with Jesus forever.

Let me put it another way and hope that I can make the same point. If there is no God, and therefore Jesus Christ was *not* God in human flesh and did *not* rise from the dead, that is to say, if the body of Jesus has long since rotted and been eaten by worms (sorry to be so graphic), *death might be a sad and even tragic event but it wouldn't necessarily be terrifying.* To die would be sad because at that moment you forever forfeit all the pleasures of life. Your friends and family and finances and all the fun you had while physically alive are taken away from you. They come to an end, because *you* come to an end. And that's sad. It's even tragic. But it's not terrifying. As one author has put it, “Falling asleep and going unconscious and never waking up into consciousness again is a tragic farewell to contemplate. The ending of a long, beautiful summer is sad” (John Piper). But it need not be terrifying.

Of course, people fear death for a lot of reasons. Some live in fear of the *unknown*. They just don't know what happens after they finally lose physical consciousness. Others fear death because of the *suffering* and pain that bring it about. Others fear death because it means the *loss of control* and the end to everything that is *familiar* and reassuring. That's why the film director Woody Allen once said, “It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

But it would almost seem as if Satan would be better served in his purpose if he could lead people *not* to fear death. After all, if they fear death they may be moved to repent of their sin and trust Christ. And if they don't have a fear of death they would feel no need to turn to Christ. Yes, but we must remember that ***there is a world of difference between the “fear of death” and the “fear of God.”*** Satan wants people to “fear death” so that he might spoil their lives and lead them to seek artificial and sinful means to put their minds at rest and at peace. But he doesn't want them to “fear God” lest they seek forgiveness and reconciliation through faith in Christ. ***If you “fear death” because you “fear God” that is good. That will lead you to repentance. But if***

you “fear death” but have no “fear of God,” Satan has you right where he wants you! In fact, our author says he has “enslaved” you.

I’m not saying that all non-Christians lead lives in which they are moment-by-moment conscious of the terrifying reality of death. A lot of them have learned *to cope by living in denial*. You don’t deny that you will eventually die, but you’ve managed to put it out of conscious thought; you suppress the idea; you shut your eyes and stop up your ears and drive from your thinking any notion that you will soon die and be forced to give an account to an infinitely holy God.

Many people simply squeeze out of their minds the prospect of death by staying incredibly *busy or numb*. They fill their lives with so much activity or frenzied distractions that they simply don’t have the time to think about dying. *Or they anesthetize their hearts and minds with drugs or alcohol or sexual and sensual pleasures or whatever it takes so they don’t have to think about it and wrestle with the fear that it evokes*. And our author calls that lifelong “slavery”.

But ultimately the greatest fear *ought* to be having to face the God whom they rejected throughout the course of their earthly life. What *ought* to make death terrifying is the prospect of standing in the presence of an infinitely holy and righteous and powerful God whose glory you defiled and whose will you defied and whose commands you denounced and whose revelation in Scripture you disregarded and whose claim on your life you denied. Death is terrifying primarily because it means we must now give an account to this God.

But for those who have entrusted their lives to Jesus Christ, for those who have put their hope and confidence and faith in his death on the cross on their behalf, for those who believe that God raised him from the dead and that he now rules sovereign and supreme over the universe, death need not ever be a fearful or terrifying thing. Indeed, instead of fear we have unshakable faith, for Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 that to be absent from the body, that is, to die physically, is to be present with the Lord!

Fifth, we now face the most important question of all: How did the death of Christ achieve this end? *What was it about the death of Jesus that broke the grip of Satan on us and set us free from the tyranny and fear of death?* The answer is found in v. 17. There we see that Jesus Christ conquered Satan and broke his power over death and set free those who trust him by dying a death in which the wrath of God against their sin was satisfied. This is what the word translated “**propitiation**” means.

By the way, someone might be tempted to say: *If Satan had the power of death, how can the death of Jesus be anything other than a victory for the Devil?* Has not our Lord fallen victim to the very design and power of Satan? Has he not, by dying, lost the war he came to wage? NO! ***Death has been defeated by death!*** That is why I titled this message, *The Death of Death in the Death of the Risen Christ!* It is because of the **nature** of Christ's death that he defeated him who exerted power over death. And the nature of that death is wrapped up in that word *propitiation* in v. 17.

Don't be frightened by such a big word ("propitiation"). It's one of the most beautiful and glorious and hope-filled words in all the Bible. We'll talk about it more next week, but let me simply say this today.

The only way in which Satan can exert any influence or control over your life is because of the guilt of your sin. ***The only reason why dying should ever be a terrifying reality is because the guilt of your sin has not been removed.*** Satan's power and authority and influence are strong only as long as the guilt of sin remains unforgiven. ***The only reason anyone should ever fear death is if they must then face the wrath and judgment of an infinitely holy God.***

But in dying for us Jesus made propitiation for our sins, which is to say that in his death he suffered and endured and satisfied in himself the wrath and judgment that was due unto sinful men and women. *I don't fear death* because there is no wrath that awaits me. *I don't fear death* because there is no judgment that I must face. *I don't fear death* because on the other side of this life is one thing and one thing only: a smiling and loving and joyful God who has forgiven me all my sin and has reconciled me to himself and has made me a child of God forever. That being true, why should I ever fear death?

When the just and righteous punishment for our sin falls on Christ, it is taken away from us. When the wrath we deserved is absorbed in Jesus, there is none left for us to endure. This is the good news of the gospel! Will you believe it? Will you cast yourself on Christ and by faith lay hold of the forgiveness that his death and resurrection bring? If you have already or if you will today I promise you that all reason to fear death will be banished. If you do not, Satan will continue to torment you and spoil your life and make you miserable with the prospect of dying.

The Apostle Paul said it as clearly and definitively as anyone in the NT. He declared in Romans 8:1 – "There is therefore now ***no condemnation*** for those who are in Christ Jesus!"

So, in bringing this to a close, let's be clear about what this does *not* mean. When Christ renders powerless this one who had the power of death it does *not* mean that Christians won't die physically, and often times painfully. It simply means they need not die fearfully or fretfully and most important of all, they do not die unforgiven.

Once again, this passage doesn't mean Satan can't kill us physically. On occasion, God grants him permission to do so (see Rev. 2:10). It simply means he can't kill us *spiritually*. Remember this: no one goes to hell because they were attacked by Satan or tempted by Satan or even possessed by Satan. The only reason anyone suffers eternal condemnation is because their sins remain unforgiven. And this is precisely what Christ has overcome by offering himself as a propitiation to satisfy the wrath of God against us.

If your sin is forgiven because you have faith in Christ, Satan is disarmed and defeated and destroyed. The only lethal weapon in his spiritual arsenal is unforgiven sin. The person who remains unforgiven is the target of his accusations, threats, and torment. But your faith in the propitiation of Christ's atoning work strips him of all power and authority. He is by the death of Christ rendered powerless!

“May God grant that you depart this life unwailed!”

Chrysostom, one of the church fathers from the late fourth and early fifth centuries, was greatly bothered by how Christians behaved at the funeral of other Christians. He was angered by the loud and ostentatious wailing and weeping that he witnessed. He wrote:

“When I behold the wailings in public places, the groaning over those who have departed this life, the howlings and all the other unseemly behavior, I am ashamed before the heathen . . . who see it, and indeed before all who for this reason laugh us to scorn. . . . [What can be more unseemly, he asks, than for a person who professes to be crucified to the world to tear his hair and shriek hysterically in the presence of death?] Those who are really worthy of being lamented are the ones who are still in fear and trembling at the prospect of death and have no faith at all in the resurrection. . . . [He then drives home his point with these words]. ***May God grant that you all depart this life unwailed!***” (cited in P. E. Hughes' commentary on Hebrews, 114-15).

We are now prepared to call roll among the dead . . .