

Christian Liberty, Part 5

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Now, if you have a copy of the Scriptures with you, please turn with me to the letter to the Hebrews, the book of Hebrews, chapter 2, and I shall read in your hearing verses 14 and 15. Speaking of our Lord Jesus, the writer to the Hebrews informs us,

"Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also Himself in like manner partook of the same, that through death He might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [or to slavery]."

Our Lord Jesus Christ said in John chapter 8 and verse 36, "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." Our Lord Jesus is set before us in the Scriptures as the great liberator. He himself said, quoting from Isaiah chapter 61, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me because He has anointed me to preach liberty to the captives, the opening of the prison to those that are bound." And so if we are sensitive at all to the message of the Scriptures, to the very poor purpose for which Jesus Christ appeared among men, we must be sensitive to this whole matter of what is the precise nature of that liberty which Christ promises to those who trust Him. What is the nature of that prison house from which He releases all who trust in Him?

Well, it is that concern that has been the focus of our study for the last four Lord's Day mornings as I am in the midst of bringing a series of studies on the subject of Christian liberty, the nature of the liberty purchased by and applied through the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the message this morning, I indicated that I wanted to open up three more lines of that liberty that is ours in Christ, time permitting. Well, time did not permit to cover those three. I covered only two.

We considered this morning that in Christ we are free from any obligation to the Mosaic Law Covenant. That is, we do not have to become kosher Jews, circumcised Jews, in order to become full-blown Christians enjoying all the liberties procured for us by the Lord Jesus, and then we saw, secondly, that in Christ we are free from the tyranny of man-made doctrines, rules, and regulations. Christ has bought us to be His loving bond slaves, and He tells us in His Word we are not to be the slaves of men.

And for those of you visiting with us who were not with us this morning, I say again tonight what I said this morning. You are under no obligation to believe any doctrine or to practice any rule or regulation that you do not see with your own eyes in the Word of God. Christ alone is the Lord of the consciences of His people.

Well, as I thought about our communion meditation tonight, and since my mind had been much involved in that third strand of this liberty procured by Christ, I felt it would be appropriate to finish up this morning's sermon tonight. And so, having considered the fact that in Christ we are free from any obligation to the Mosaic Law covenant, and in Christ we are free from the tyranny of man-made doctrines, rules and regulations, I want you to consider with me in our communion meditation tonight that in Christ we are free from the enslaving power of the fear of death. That's exactly what we are told in the passage that I read in your hearing:

"Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He, that is Christ, also in like manner partook of the same, that through death he might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage or to slavery."

Now let me say a word about the setting in which these words come to us. Whenever anyone is quoting the Bible and seeking to prove something to you from the Bible, it's always safe to read a little bit before, a little bit after, to make sure they're not snickering you. And when we use the word context, that's all we're talking about is that God's statements come to us with mental and verbal umbilical cords, and we need to be very careful that we don't cut those umbilical cords. Here, in this particular part of the letter to the Hebrews, the writer to the Hebrews is seeking to demonstrate that though Christ is greater than the angels, and therefore worthy of our trust and of our worship, yet for a little while He became lower than the angels.

Look at verse 9: "We behold Him who has been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death...." In order that He might take the place of the dying Savior, He puts Himself for a little while in a posture a little lower than the angels. And in this setting of this particular section of the letter, this writer is demonstrating to these Hebrew Christians that though Christ is greater than the angels in His person, He is the Son of God, yet He takes a place a little lower than the angels for a time in order to be a Redeemer of the same stuff of which we are made. And here in the passage that I want to open up in your hearing, verses 14 and 15, there are three major ideas, and I want us to look at them one at a time.

First of all, we have an unmistakable affirmation of His true humanity. Look at the language of verse 14:

"Since then the children [and in the context the children, are those whom Christ saves and regards as His children and His family. In the context the children are those whom Christ has brought to Himself on the basis of His saving work] are sharers in flesh and blood. He also Himself in like manner partook of the same."

Those whom Christ saves are real, sure enough, flesh and blood human beings. He does not save angels, disembodied spirits. He saves the likes of us who are flesh and blood. We have real, concrete, corporeal humanity. Stick pins in us and we bleed. Slap us and we holler. Break a bone, and we hurt. We are real human beings. And here, in this passage, we have this unmistakable affirmation that this is the kind

of humanity that our Lord Jesus Christ took to Himself: "Since the children are sharers in flesh and blood [that is, real humanity], He also Himself in like manner partook of the same."

And there's a beautiful, subtle shade in the original that helps to underscore that He did not always have this flesh and blood humanity. The tense of the verb used with regard to us, that the children are sharers in flesh and blood, is a tense that points to the fact that from the time we were conceived and were constituted human beings, we were and continue to be flesh and blood. But when it says that He also partook of the same, it's a tense that points to a point action. There was a given point in time when He who existed before that time took to Himself flesh and blood.

And so it points to the reality of the incarnation when in the mystery of that marvelous act of God the Spirit brooded over the Virgin Mary, and the angel said, "That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus." So he who existed from eternity as the second person of the Godhead, equal to the Father, in the presence of the Father, comes forth from the Father, and by way of Mary's womb takes to Himself real, sure enough human flesh and blood. He takes to himself a true but sinless humanity. Here is an unmistakable affirmation of his true humanity. Since the children are sharers of flesh and blood, he himself in like manner partook of the same.

But now secondly, we not only have this unmistakable affirmation of His true humanity, but we have an unmistakable explanation of the purpose for which He took this true humanity, an unmistakable explanation of the purpose for which He took this true humanity. Why did Jesus take to Himself a true humanity in Mary's womb? Was it, as some people say, "Well, He wanted to show us how elevated and how worthy and how dignified humanity is, so He came from heaven to become one of us to show what great people we are." Is that the purpose for which he did it?

Look at the text: "He likewise partook of the same in order that through death...." Ah, there's the key words: "in order that through death". And in these words we have an explanation of the purpose for which He took on this true humanity. He took on this real true humanity that He might experience a real death. Angels do not die. Angels cannot die. Phantoms that have mere appearance of humanity, they cannot and they do not die if such exists. He took on true humanity in order that He might undergo real death. Do you see that with your own eyes in your own Bible? "He partook of the same in order that, through death...."

In other words, the Scriptures are telling us that the true significance of Bethlehem is only understood under the shadow of Golgotha. He comes to the manger in order that he might end up on the cross. That's what our writer is telling us. And we will never begin to understand the most elementary truths of Holy Scripture concerning the incarnation, that is, the enfleshment of the second person of the Godhead, until that connection is grasped with eyes that are opened by the Spirit of God to understand it. He takes to himself our humanity in order that he might experience a

real death. Bethlehem is to the end that there might be a Golgotha. There is a cradle in order that there might be a cross.

But then, thirdly, not only do we have this unmistakable affirmation of His true humanity ("He takes flesh and blood"), this unmistakable explanation of the purpose for taking that humanity, ("that through death"), but we have an unmistakable declaration of the two-fold accomplishment of His death. Look at the text: "In order that through death He might bring to naught him that hath the power of death, that is the devil." That's number one. "And might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to slavery." That's number two. So not only is there the affirmation that he took a true humanity, not only an explanation of the purpose for taking that true humanity, but a declaration of the two-fold accomplishment of that death.

And just as we are not free to define why He took the humanity (God tells us it was that He might die), we are not free to define the purpose and the accomplishment of his death. God defines it for us. And here we are told that there are two accomplishments that flow from his death. Number one, the first was to put the devil out of commission. It's very difficult to translate the word in the original "in order that He might bring to nothing", "He might destroy", "He might render inoperative him that hath the power of death, that is, the devil", "He died that he might put the devil out of commission", "He died that he might render the devil powerless and render him powerless in a particular way in connection with the devil's involvement in our experience of death."

Now, frankly, I do not understand fully what this phrase means, where the devil is described as the one who had the power of death. I couldn't find any two commentaries that agree as precisely the way in which the devil has the power of death, because the Scripture teaches us any power the devil has is limited and delegated power. In the book of the Revelation, John has a vision of the exalted Christ, and he sees Christ holding a key ring, and Christ says, "I have the keys of hell and of death." You read later on in the book of the Revelation of men seeking death and not being able to find it. The Bible tells us it is appointed unto men once to die. And that appointment is not made by the devil; it's made by God. So that whatever this means that Satan, the devil, has the power of death, it does not mean that he is some power equal to and opposite God, and we have some kind of dualism, God and the devil wrestling it out, and we don't know how it's all going to turn out.

But in some particular way, and I think it could be this--I'm not being dogmatic: who was it that came to our first parents in the Garden of Eden and tempted them? God had said to Adam, "Of all the trees of the garden you may freely eat, but that tree in the midst of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for in the day that you eat thereof you will surely die." Literally, "dying, you will die." Death will enter the experience of the human race if Adam disobeys. And it is the tempter, the serpent, the devil that comes using the serpent in the garden, and he cons Adam and Eve into thinking there is something to be had in the way of

disobedience to God that is not to be had in a life of strict obedience to God. And since he was the instigator, the tempter, there is a peculiar sense in which he has the power of death. I'm not going to say more than that, but what is clear from the text is that by his death, Jesus has rendered powerless, has put the devil in some very radical sense out of commission. And he was very conscious that his death was going to accomplish this.

I ask you to turn with me to the Gospel of John in chapter 12 and verse 31. Shortly before He was to die, our Lord Jesus said these words to His disciples: "Now is the judgment of this world. Now shall the prince of this world be cast out. Now shall the prince of this world be cast out." And in 1 John 3 and verse 9, we read these words: "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested that He might destroy the works of the devil." So here's the devil stirring up Judas to betray the Lord Jesus. You remember in the upper room it says, "Then Satan entered into Judas." There was some kind of actual possession with the devil himself. Satan entered Judas. And he goes to the chief priest and strikes his deal. But you see, in handing Jesus over to death, he then effects his own death. When he seems to be accomplishing his great design to rid the world of the Son of God, the light of the world, the deliverer of men from sin, as the devil seeks to accomplish his ends in bringing the Son of God to destruction, in that very intent, he himself is destroyed. And so this passage says that Jesus takes a true humanity to Himself in order that He might die a real death which has as its purpose and accomplishment to put the devil out of commission, to render him powerless, to break the back of his influence as the one who is and had the power of death.

But now, secondly, and this will be far more clear because I understand it more fully myself. Look at the second purpose: to deliver His people from the enslaving power of the fear of death. Not only did He die that He might render inoperative, put out of commission him that had the power of death, that is the devil, but now notice the second thing: "And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [or slavery]". He died in order to deliver those for whom He died from the enslaving power of the fear of death.

Now, is this saying that every single human being consciously lives with a constant fear of death that is enslaving? No. The devil has so blinded multitudes, there are many, like the person described in Psalm 73, who rock along through life, do not give thought to eternity and death and judgment and standing before God. However, the moment anyone begins to take seriously who he or she is, God's creature made in the image of God, made accountable to God, on his way to the judgment of God, for the Scripture says it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this comes judgment. Death and judgment. The moment we begin to take that seriously, the moment we begin to take our fingers out of our ears and turn down the music and turn down the influences by which we dull our consciences to those realities, and we begin to take seriously God, sin, death, and hell, there is nothing more enslaving than the dread of death.

It wraps us up in its power and that haunting sense that death will land me in the jaws of almighty, inflexible justice. I will stand before the God Who made me, God against whom I've sinned, the God Who has power to cast me into hell. And few things are more enslaving than that fear of death. When these realities begin to break into the realm of conscious concern, it's not as though we are adding something to what is. We are beginning to get in touch with what is. And when we do, there is this enslaving power of the fear of death.

And why did Jesus die? To deliver us from that, so that by His death, taking the consequences of our sins and swallowing up all the wrath of God that should have fallen upon us, and going into the jaws of death as the substitute of sinners, and then coming out of that borrowed tomb on the third day, breaking the bands of death, demonstrating that He fully satisfied all of the wrath of God against the sins of those on whose behalf He died. Christ has conquered death, and when we have embraced Him, and we have cast upon Him the full weight of all of the hell-deservingness of our sins, and we have committed ourselves to Him as our only Savior, in that relationship, the fear of death is now broken, and we are set free from the slavery that it brings.

This is why the Scripture can use such language as this. We read one of the verses this morning in Revelation 14:13: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth." Blessed. To be blessed is to be the recipient of blessing from God, not cursing. And here we read, "Blessed are the dead who die...." Where? In the Lord. It doesn't say blessed are the dead who die in the church, blessed are the dead who die in this or in that, but die in the Lord. They have come to be united to the Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered death by His death and resurrection. They are blessed so that death is no longer that horrible, haunting, carking, pressing enemy that's seeking to track me down, and I'm doing my best to avoid him, and yet I know eventually he'll find me, and he'll corner me, and he'll get me. I can look death straight in the eye and say, "Death, when you come, it'll bring me into blessing that God says I'll never know till you come. Come and take me. Come on, death! Bring it on, death! All you can do is land me safely in the presence of my Lord Jesus."

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, from henceforth saith the Lord, that they may...." What? Rest from their labors. "Death, you're going to bring me into eternal rest." People ask me, "Pastor Martin, when are you going to retire?" I say, "Here's my text on retirement." I'm serious. I said, my whole theology of retirement is right here: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, and they rest from their labors." As long as I can labor, I'm going to labor until God says, "Death, go get him." And then I'm done. And my works will follow me. That's not natural to me.

As a boy, as a young teenager, I know this slavery of the fear of death. Lying on my bed night after night, afraid to go to sleep, for fear I'd wake up in hell. Praying, "O God, O God, don't let me die in my sleep. O God, have mercy upon me." And almost waking up the next morning and wiping my brow and saying, "Thank you, I didn't drop into hell in my sleep." And one of the most glorious things when God was pleased to bring me to trust in His dear Son, bring me into union with Christ, was to be able to

think of death without the slavery and the terror of the fear of death. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

Listen to the language of the Apostle Paul. In Philippians chapter 1, he's in a Roman prison. And he says in this situation, "I'm torn. I've got two tremendous longings within my heart." Notice how he describes it. He says in verse 22, "But if to live in the flesh, if this shall bring fruit for my work, then what shall I choose? I don't know. I'm in a strait between the two. Having the desire to depart and to be with Christ, for it is very far better, yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake." Here's a man who says, I'm pulled in two directions. "A part of me says, 'I really want to stay and help these Philippians and others who need my ministry.' On the other hand, I have a longing [this is how he describes death] to depart and to be with Christ."

How can you be enslaved and in bondage to an entity that all it can do is take you out of a body that was beaten and bruised? He said, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus from all of the lashes I had received, from all of the torture I had endured." How could he look at this thing called death as an enemy when all it would do is make him depart from this body and land him in the immediate presence of Christ? That's how he viewed death: departing and being with Christ.

Peter, similar, 2 Peter chapter 1. Look how Peter views his death. This one who at one time was scared, witless, took oaths upon himself that he didn't know Christ for fear that he too might be dragged off and crucified with Him. But after he repents and he's filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter now can speak of his death in such beautiful terms. 2 Peter 1, look at verses 13 and 14. He says, "I think it right, as long as I'm in this tabernacle [that's a word that can mean tent]...." He says, "As long as I'm here in my body alive, I'm living in a tent." He says, "Now as long as I'm in this tabernacle, this body, my human living existence, I think it necessary to stir you up by putting you in remembrance, knowing that the putting off of my tabernacle comes swiftly, even as the Lord Jesus Christ signified unto me." (And there he's referring back to John chapter 21, where the Lord said to Peter, "When you were young, you ran about wherever you wanted to go like a little careless kid. When you're old, some people are going to take you against your will, where you don't want to go." And then it says, "This spake He signifying by what death he was going to die.") So Peter knows that before long, somebody's going to knock on the cell door and come in and say, off you go. And tradition tells us he was crucified upside down. For Paul, he knew he would kneel by the chopping block. Boom, his head would plop in a basket. But look how Peter talks about death. He says, "I'm going to put off this tent. Old tent's got some rips in it. It's got some tears getting thinned by the tent flaps anyway. So I'm going to put off this tabernacle soon, just like Jesus told me."

Does that sound like a man enslaved and in terror by the fear of death? No. Death holds no terror for him. Why? Because he understood the purpose of the death of Jesus. He understood what Jesus accomplished in His death. In His death, He conquered death. and took away everything from death that is the wages of sin.

Yes, we must still die, but for the Christian, dying is not the result of the wages of sin. It is not the punitive punishment of God upon him. It is a discipline by which the Lord will bring us into His blessed presence, so much so that the Apostle Paul makes what to me is one of the most amazing statements in all of Scripture in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Trying to help these Corinthians to get over their party spirit where some were lining up behind one preacher and some behind another, he said, "Don't do that. They're all your gifts in Christ." Verse 21: "Wherefore, let no one glory in men, for all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, [now listen to this] or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

It's relatively easy for me to believe in Christ, life is mine, but even death is mine. That's what it says. All things are yours, life or death. Death is now mine. Christ has made it my servant to bring me into the immediate presence of my Savior. You see that with your Bible with your own eyes? There it is. Death is yours. Death is mine.

No wonder both Luther and Calvin with pastoral sensitivity wrote words like this: "He who fears death or is not willing to die", said Luther, "is not sufficiently Christian. As yet, such people lack faith in the resurrection and love this life more than the life to come." Calvin wrote similarly,

"Although we must still meet death, let us nevertheless be calm and serene in living and dying when we have Christ going before us. If anyone cannot set his mind at rest by disregarding death, that man should know that he has not yet gone far enough in the faith of Christ. For nothing in this whole universe, not even death, has the power to separate the Christian believer from the love of God, the living God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Why did Christ die? Our text tells us He died to render inoperative, to put out of commission the devil, the devil particularly as the one who in a way I do not fully understand is described as having the power of death, and to deliver His people from the enslaving power of the fear of death, so that as we come to the table tonight and we remember our Lord Jesus in His dying love, if we cannot reason from His broken body and His shed blood to our funeral with the anticipation of conquering faith and joy, something is defective in our understanding of what Jesus accomplished in His death or in our present confidence in what He accomplished in His death.

What does that mean? We can look forward to the experience of dying without any apprehension? Of course not. We've never died before. When I go on the operating table and I'm in the holding pen before they wheel you in, I don't have much apprehension anymore. I've been there eight times. I know what's going to happen. Needles going in, going to feel a little fuzzy. Next thing I know, I'll wake up in the recovery room. A little bit of apprehension, but no great apprehension. But the first time? Never been there before. Never been put in La La Land on the operating table. We've not died before. What will the experience of dying be like? What will lead to it?

Will I experience a long period of pain and debilitating illness? Those apprehensions are normal and human and not sinful in themselves.

But death itself, that radical separation of the soul and the body, Death in terms of what it can do to land us in the prison house where we await the final day of judgment and soul and body joined together to be cast into hell. No, no! Death has been stripped of that power in the death of Jesus Christ. And so if we understand: why did Jesus take through humanity? In order to die. And why did He die? To deliver us from this enslaving power of the fear of death.

One of the most touching stories--it's a true story--I've told it perhaps once or twice over the past years. It's hard not to repeat a few things after 42 years, but some of you haven't heard it, and you need to hear it. The late Dr. A. W. Tozer told of an incident of a young preacher who went to visit an old, dear saint, a woman who was on her deathbed. And he'd never been in that setting before, where someone was about to die. It was a new experience for him. So he was desperately trying to know just exactly what to say and how to say it, and wanted to do it just right. And this dear old saint, a godly woman, she sensed he was struggling. So she said, "Young man, stop all your worrying about what you're saying to me." She said, "In a few minutes, I'm going to cross over the river and my father owns the land on both sides. Isn't that beautiful? She said, "Son, don't trouble yourself. It's not that big a deal. In a few minutes, I'm going to cross over the river and my father owns the land on both sides." All things are yours. Life, this side of the river. Death, that side of the river. Your father owns the land on both sides. And because you are in Christ, you have a title to that land.

Now, I want to talk very personally. Some of you children, you don't like to think about death, do you? It scares you, gives you nightmares. Hmm? Like I was? I didn't like to think about death. I'd rather think about anything but death. Children, you don't need to dread death. With the present level of your understanding of your need of Jesus and the fact that Jesus died in order to deliver all who trust in Him from the slavery and the binding power of the fear of death, you pillow your head at night saying, "Lord Jesus, I trust only in what You did upon the cross to take away my sins. I trust only in You to make me fit to stand before a holy God." No child ever perished trusting in the Lord Jesus.

And for some of you who aren't children--you're older. And you have a better understanding of why it is that you ought to fear death, because you have a better understanding of the many ways in which you have offended a holy God and broken His law and deserve His wrath. You can do all you want to fill your mind with your Walkman constantly in your ears, every spare moment watching the boob tube, doing anything to drive away the thoughts. But in those quiet hours, in those moments before you drift off into sleep, you feel the chains of the slavery to the fear of death, don't you? Come on, be honest. Don't you? Don't you? Don't you?

Jesus died to break those chains. He died to break them. You don't need to live and stumble on from the present state into young adulthood with those chains clanking around you. They can be broken in Christ so that though you think and plan and pray in terms of a full life and seek responsibly to prepare for adult life over the long haul. The Scripture says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for you know not what a day may bring forth." The Scriptures tell us about a man who planned and plotted over the long haul, and God said, "You fool, this night your soul shall be required of you." Dear young person, Don't trifle with death. Death is a horrible, vicious enemy to you if you are not in Christ. But in Christ, death is yours. Death is yours! It is but God's rough door that swings to land you in the presence of Jesus.

And you who are older, for whom the reality of your allotted time gets more and more real, what happens to you when you think of death? Can you look death straight in the eye? I don't mean shifty-eyed. You take your glasses off and look death straight in the eyeball and say, "Death, I know what you can and what you can't do to me." You don't fear death with that cringing, crippling, enslaving fear.

It is a dishonor to Christ for a Christian to have a crippling fear of death. Christ died to deliver you from it. That's what our text says. If you're a child of God and you're not delivered from it, something's bad wrong. Unbelief or ignorance of what Christ has procured, whatever it is, give yourself no rest until you are a living monument that Jesus has what he died for. He died, this text says, "to deliver those who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Give yourself no rest until you are a living monument that Jesus has got what he died for in you.

Surely, as we come to the table, we have reason to celebrate with joy and remember with thanksgiving the One Who died for us in order to deliver us from the enslaving power of the fear of death. That's what He died for. Among other things, this in a sense is the crowning liberty that we've considered in the nine facets of our liberty in Christ. Blessed liberty from that which is the inevitable experience of all of us.

You won't all have surgery. You won't all have cancer. You won't all have this or that. But it is appointed unto men once to die. And barring the return of Christ and being alive at His return, we're going to die. May God grant that we die in the triumphs of Christ's death, which means we face our death and we go through our death without the chains of slavery to the fear of death.

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