

## **Christ Came to Conquer Death**

I'm dying. Did you know that? I'm dying. My hair gets grayer, everything is slower and hurts more, I have steadily less energy. You might think, oh he's not really dying then, he's just getting old. Not true. "Old" is the name of a village some of us walk through, but I don't stop walking. This road ends when I die, and these things happening to me tell us that my death is getting closer. What's more, you're all dying too.

This year for Advent I plan to do three messages on "Why Christ Came." Advent means "coming," and in Advent we remember his first coming and we also remind ourselves about his second coming. Why did Christ come? Why did God send his Son to earth?

Christ came because of death, because of judgement, and because of heaven. Christ came to rescue us from death, and to destroy death itself. Christ came because we will all face judgement, and we needed help with that, too. Christ came to bring us to himself and to his Father, which we call "heaven." Today's message: death. Christ came to conquer death.

### **We Die Because We Sin**

In Genesis 2, God told Adam, "don't eat from the tree of knowing good and evil, because on the day you eat that fruit, you will die." When you eat it, you will die. The wages of sin is death, and we've been sinning from the start, and that's why we die.

The way God talks to Adam there, we might have expected Adam to die right away. But in Genesis 5, we read that Adam lived 930 years, and then he died. That's a long time. It sounds to me like God delayed death a long time. On the other hand, Adam and Eve did die.

### **Death is a Fearful End**

Psalms 88 is the prayer of someone who's been very sick, and close to death a long time.

*I am overwhelmed with troubles, and my life draws near to death.  
I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.  
I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more.  
Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?  
Are your wonders known in the dark place, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?  
From youth I have suffered and been near death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair.*

Death is a fearful end. Psalm 116 is the prayer of someone who God rescued from death.

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.  
Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.*

*The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me;  
I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "Lord, save me!"  
Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.  
For you, Lord, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,  
that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.*

This joy and celebration we get right away. He thought he would die, and prayed, and God saved him. Death is fearful: "cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me, I was overcome by distress and sorrow." No wonder the psalmist was relieved and happy.

One reason to speak about death openly is that there is much denial of death around us. Death won't be denied. It is a severe judgment that has come on us because we have turned away from God. Christ came to defeat it, both death and the fear of death.

Hebrews 2:14-15 - *Since the children have flesh and blood, Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

Christ came to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Let's give these words full force. That means that fear of death steers our lives more than we realize. We are slaves to the fear. We do things because we are afraid to die that we would not otherwise do.

Christ has given us the answer, so that we can go through it, but not without fear. A book called *The Denial of Death* shows how much of our lives are governed by this fear, without us knowing it, because we work so hard to deny it. I read that almost 40 years ago. It is not a Christian book, but the book agreed with the Bible completely. (The author later became a Christian.)

### **Paul's Fear of Death – 2 Cor 1:8-10**

In two places in Paul's letters, he speaks of preferring to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. In those letters, death holds no fear for Paul. But that is not the whole story.

Paul talks about death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and again in 2 Corinthians 5. If you carefully compare those two sections, you can see that when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he assumed that Christ would come back before he died. Most Christians in that time thought that. Paul took it as given that the Lord would return while he still lived, before he died.

Now let's read what happened after he wrote 1 Corinthians. 2 Cor 1:8-10 - *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again.*

We don't know any details. *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.*

Paul was in some situation in which he was sure that he would not get out of this alive. He would die. And it sounds like the most awful experience ever. *It was far beyond our ability to endure.* It sounds like Paul completely unraveled, some kind of collapse, great despair. He was afraid, because all of a sudden he was sure he would die.

This account is brief, but these are the strongest words of anguish and despair that Paul ever uses, and it happened because he was staring death in the face.

Why did this happen? Because God wanted to teach Paul something. God wanted Paul to rely on the God who raises the dead. That was all Paul had left, and God wanted to get Paul there, and this was the only way. At some point, before Paul died, God intervened, God did the Psalm 116 rescue for Paul, and kept him alive.

The two places where Paul writes about preferring to die and be with the Lord come **after** this experience. **After** Paul had been at the brink of death, had stared at death and completely unglued, and then put his hope in the God who raises the dead, **then** he could say it was better to be absent from the body.

I want to do two things here. One is to speak openly from the Bible about death, to help us not to deny it. The other is to make fear of death normal. We have a great hope in death, Christ defeated death, but it is still a fearful thing, even to those with strong faith in God.

### **Christ's Fear of Death**

Our Lord himself feared death. In John 12 we read Jesus saying to those around him, "*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? But for this hour I came.*" Jesus himself had a troubled soul, knowing that death was coming.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, he was in great distress. "*Father, all things are possible with you, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.*"

Some say that what Jesus feared was not crucifixion and death, but the Father's wrath on him as the one bearing our sins. I've said this before, and will say it again: don't you believe that. Jesus did not suffer from the Father's wrath. Jesus told his followers ahead of time, repeatedly, that he would suffer much. He would suffer much, and he was always clear who would cause his suffering: people, sinful people. Jesus would suffer much at human hands. He was clear on this.

In Luke 24, on resurrection morning, the angels speak to the women at the empty tomb: *Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over into the hands of sinners.*

He was not handed over into God's hands to suffer, he was handed over into human hands to suffer and die.

And he was afraid. In Hebrews 5 we read that Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. Not save him from pain, save him from death. He wanted so much to be saved from death, and he knew if he asked, God would save him from death.

But then God's plan would fail, so he prayed, *not my will but yours be done*. Jesus feared suffering and death, just as we do.

I have in the past spoken to you about how we do not need to fear death. That is all still entirely true. Today I want to make fear of dying real and normal. Jesus came so that we would have hope in death, and so that after death, we could live a very good life without this fear at all, a life with no death looming. Jesus came so we could have that. But he felt the fearful end.

### **Different Experiences of Dying**

Believers experience death in different ways, depending on the person. These do not show more or less faith, not at all. The Lord gives each of us our own path to walk toward death, and our task is to be faithful on the path he has given us.

Some believers, like Miranda, are ready to welcome death. It holds no dread. These are usually people who have already suffered much and lost much. Life has already taken away much of what we lose at death, they have little left to lose, and dying is freedom.

Other believers at the end of their lives have doubts about whether they are really the Lord's people or not. They doubt their salvation. That is an unhappy burden to bear, but to some degree it is not rare. Doubts are a trouble, a difficulty, that the Lord sometimes allows.

The most common experience is fear. Paul knew about that, and so does Jesus. Biblically that is the normal experience. Jesus came to give us hope in that, and to arrange for us another life that does not have death or fear of death. In Revelation 21, a loud voice from the Throne of God says, "*There will be no more death.*"

### **Death is an Enemy**

Death is the last enemy to be destroyed. It is an enemy. It is not a medical problem that science will some day resolve. It is not the great liberator from suffering. It is an enemy. It is not natural. It is the most unnatural thing there is. Where nature really flourishes, the new garden of Eden in the new heaven and earth, where things grow freely and life goes wild, there will be no death. It is an enemy.

## Christ Conquered Death!

We are on our way to a life without death. That is the real answer to death.

Our rescue from death comes in four stages. First, when we believe, we receive eternal life. Whoever puts their trust in Christ to see them through all this, receives a life at that time that will never end. Everyone of us that professes that Jesus is Lord has eternal life.

Second, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Revelation calls this the first resurrection. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *Today you will be with me in paradise*. Betty and Miranda and many others are now there.

Of course, if the Lord comes back sooner, we will skip past that stage. Many believers will never experience the first resurrection, they will go straight to the second resurrection.

Third stage of rescue is the resurrection of our bodies. *The Lord Jesus Christ, by the power than enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies to that they will be like his glorious body. The dead in Christ will rise first. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.* Our bodies will be raised just as the Lord's was raised.

The last stage of our rescue is the end of death itself. *The last enemy to be destroyed is death*, says Paul. *Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire*, we read in Revelation. It's hard to imagine exactly what's going on there, but the basic truth is clear enough. No more death.

## The First Gospel Message

When the apostles first preached Christ, starting at Pentecost, the gospel was that **God raised Jesus from the dead, and they were his eye-witnesses**. Period. That was their gospel. That changed everything. What the world really needs to know is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

I once when through all the sermons in Acts. I counted how many verses there were about forgiveness of sins, and how many were about the resurrection of Jesus. The ratio was about seven to two. For every two verses about repentance and forgiveness of sins, they preached seven verses telling the story of God raising Jesus from the dead, and they had seen him.

God through Jesus conquered Death! That is what the world needs so badly to know. We have to be told that we have a sin problem, but everyone knows we have a big death problem. God through Jesus conquered Death. Christ came to conquer death. Praise the Lord! Amen.

PRAYER: Oh God, thank you. Oh Lord, thank you. We got ourselves into this terrible mess, and you are getting us out of it. Father, thank you for not sparing your Son. Jesus, thank you for your obedience. Father, thank you for raising him from the dead. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.