

The King who always wins.

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 for 11/22/2020 by Pastor Bolwerk

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

²¹For since death came by a man, the resurrection of the dead also is going to come by a man. ²²For as in Adam they all die, so also in Christ they all will be made alive. ²³But each in his own order: Christ as the firstfruits and then Christ's people, at his coming. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has done away with every other ruler and every other authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign "until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

²⁶Death is the last enemy to be done away with. ²⁷Certainly, "he has put all things in subjection under his feet." Now when it says that all things have been put in subjection, obviously that does not include the one who subjected all things to him. ²⁸But when all things have been subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who subjected all things to him, in order that God may be all in all.

Theme: The King who always wins.

What is the purpose of a king? For thousands of years the main purpose of a king was to fight. The king normally led the army into battle against the kingdom's enemies. The king would fight to protect the people who served him. He would defend his people against their enemies so they could live in safety.

But kings did not always win their battles. Sometimes they lost. Sometimes they signed peace treaties with kings and nations that were more powerful. And even if a king was successful in keeping peace for a time, that peace never lasted because eventually, kings die. When they die, they can no longer protect people. No king always wins. Either they will lose a battle or lose their life.

While there may not be kings around anymore who will fight our enemies there are still people in this world who fight to protect us from our worldly "enemies," that is people or things that would do us bodily harm. Political and military leaders work to protect us from our nation's enemies. Police and security companies help to defend us against thieves, robbers, or even con artists. And people in the fields of science and medicine help to protect us from things that may be harmful to our bodies, such as viruses, diseases, or toxins.

Yet none of these people can stop all of our enemies. That means we are often the ones who end up fighting and defending against the attacks of our enemies. For example, the COVID-19 virus. It is an enemy that works to attack and harm our bodies. Scientists are working to produce a vaccine, but they do not have one ready yet. That means we need to defend ourselves from this virus. So we wear masks, socially distance ourselves from others, wash our hands regularly, and use hand sanitizer and cleaners. But even these things don't always stop the virus. Even with all of these precautions people still get sick with COVID-19. Some people die from this virus, yet many people do not. Many people recover from this illness. Some win that battle, and some do not.

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But even if you never get COVID-19, or if you recover from it, how long will it be before some other enemy attacks? How many enemies can you defend against before you lose the battle? Even if you defeat the attack of every virus or bacteria that invades your body, even if you stopped every physical attack of enemies in this world, there is one enemy that we will never defeat. That enemy is death.

Contrary to what so many people believe, death is not the result of a virus, or an accident, or a disease, or old age. Death is the result of sin. The Apostle Paul tells us, **“death came by a man”** (v. 21), and then Paul tells us who that man was: **“For as in Adam they all die”** (v. 22). The first living human, Adam, sinned and brought death into this world. Now, due to sin, everyone faces death because everyone is sinful. And that clock of death starts ticking from the moment our life begins. King David wrote, **“I was sinful when my mother conceived me”** (Psalm 51:5).

The death that sin brings to us is a separation. Death separates. Spiritual death is when sin separates people from God in this life. Then, when a person dies physically death is the separation of body and soul. And if the soul is not made right with God before physical death then the soul faces eternal death, eternal separation from God in hell.

Death does not discriminate. It affects everyone: every nationality, gender, and race. Death is a consequence of sin. God says in the scriptures that, **“The soul who sins is the one who will die”** (Ezekiel 18:20). In the end, everyone dies. Everyone dies because death is something we have all earned, as Paul said in his letter to the Romans, **“the wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). We earned that death by all of the sins we commit every day: the secret sins, the willful sins, the accidental sins, the sins of our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Sin is the chisel that death uses to separate body and soul, and sadly we are the ones swinging the hammer.

So, is there any hope for us in this hopeless situation we are in? Does death just win? No, because we have a King to defend us. We have Jesus! We have a King who always wins! It may have looked like Jesus lost on Good Friday. We heard in our Gospel reading how Jesus was beaten and mocked by those Roman soldiers. But even in their mocking they spoke the truth. They said, **“Hail, King of the Jews!”** (Matthew 27:29). Jesus is the King who came to destroy the power that sin holds over us. The sinless Son of God willingly went to the cross to pay our wage of death. Christ paid the price for our sins, and in doing so he released us from the ultimate consequence of our sins: eternal separation from God. All who trust in Jesus' saving work no longer face eternal death in hell. Jesus defeated eternal death!

But physical death is something we still have to face. One day, death is going to claim our bodies. But even that death is only temporary. Eventually, death itself will die. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed. The Apostle Paul assures us of that when he says, **“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”** (v. 20).

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Christ is the “firstfruits.” The “firstfruits” were the first part of all that the Israelites harvested. The Israelites were to offer those “firstfruits” as a sacrifice to God. These sacrifices were given trusting that the Lord of the harvest would bless them with more to come. The firstfruits were God’s guarantee that the remainder of the harvest would come in. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God’s guarantees that there will be more resurrections. The full harvest of believers will happen on Judgment Day.

And until the Final Day, Paul says that believers “sleep” in Jesus. This is not just a nice way for Paul to make death less scary. It’s really a picture of what death is like for the believer. Think about what sleeping is like: Your body is resting, but your mind is still active. After sleeping your body wakes up refreshed, ready to live your life. That’s what death is like. When we die our bodies “sleep” in the ground while our souls are active in heaven. Then one day Jesus will come and “wake up” our bodies. Our bodies will be raised from the dead, renewed and refreshed for an eternal life.

But this sleep is only for those who belong to Jesus in faith. Death for the unbeliever is not a blessed sleep. It is the beginning of a nightmare which has no ending. If those people do not want Christ’s fruits of righteousness, they are going to be judged on their own sinful, rotten fruits. Those rotten fruits cannot save them from eternal death.

Paul goes on to point out, **“For since death came by a man, the resurrection of the dead also is going to come by a man”** (v. 21). The first man Adam brought death into the world when he sinned. So the reversal of death also comes through a man, but not just any man. It comes through the God-man, Jesus Christ. Even though he is fully human, as true God Jesus has the power to overcome our greatest enemy. That is why our King, Jesus, is able to win over death and rise from the grave. And Jesus’ win, become our win.

Paul says, **“For as in Adam they all die, so also in Christ they all will be made alive”** (v. 22). Paul literally says in Adam all “are dying.” It’s an ongoing process. He’s reminding us of our sinful spiritual condition. Sin is not just what we do, it is a part of who we are. Because of our sinful nature, we are dying every day. The knowledge that every day we are one step closer to the grave can cause us fear and worry.

But Paul tells us the solution to our fears and our worry: **“In Christ they all will be made alive”** (v. 22b). Our King has conquered death. By his resurrection Christ guarantees he will raise us from death to life when he returns on the Last Day. Jesus’ resurrection reverses all that death has caused. We know this isn’t going to happen right away. We will still suffer the effects of death for a time. But that doesn’t mean death wins because we trust in the King who always wins. He is the King who fights for us!

On a cross our King fought and defeated sin, and Satan, and hell. Now he offers us his forgiveness which covers every sin. He has promised us a home in heaven where death can never touch us again. Jesus allows us to fall asleep in him so that we wake up in our own room in his Father’s heavenly mansion. Our King has won for us real life, a joyful life that is never going to end.

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And that life is not just for our souls. The Apostle Paul tells us, **“Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has done away with every other ruler and every other authority and power. For he must reign ‘until he has put all his enemies under his feet.’ Death is the last enemy to be done away with”** (vs. 24-26). Paul says of Jesus, “He must reign!” Jesus is not in heaven sitting with His feet up on the coffee table eating bon-bons and watching soap operas. He’s working! He’s ruling over everything in this world for your good. He is ruling over our hearts and minds with his Word and his Sacraments. Our King is doing away with every other ruler, authority, and power. Paul tells us that our king **“has put all his enemies under his feet”** (v. 25). That is the Bible’s way of describing how Jesus is going to completely destroy all his enemies. In the end, all of Christ’s enemies will be crushed under the feet of the King of kings and Lord of lords. And the last and greatest enemy to be destroyed is death.

When Paul says that the last enemy to be “done away with” is death, the Greek word that is translated “done away with” means “to put an end to” or “to abolish.” When Jesus returns, death itself will cease to exist. Jesus is going to put an end to it. So, when death is defeated once and for all, the only thing left for believers is life. The only thing left is a glorious eternity in the presence of our crucified, risen, and ruling King!

No matter how we die in this world – whether from the COVID virus, or simply by falling asleep in our old age – we have the confidence that death is dead. Yes, we will all die. But through faith in Jesus, we will all live. We will live because we trust in the King who always wins! Jesus has defeated our last and greatest enemy. And his victory is your victory. Amen.