

“From Grave to Glory”

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22; 1 Corinthians 15

On May 20, 1506, the great Italian explorer Christopher Columbus died in Valladolid, Spain. Columbus was the first European to explore the Americas. He explored the West Indies, South America, and Central America, but historians say that he died a disappointed man. Columbus died without realizing the great scope of his achievement. He had discovered for Europe the New World, whose riches over the next century would help make Spain the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth.

In the town where he died, there stands a monument commemorating the great discoverer. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the memorial is a statue of a lion destroying one of the Latin words that had been part of Spain's motto for centuries. Before Columbus made his voyages, the Spaniards thought they had reached the outer limits of earth. Their national motto was “Ne Plus Ultra,” a Latin phrase which means “No More Beyond.” The word being torn away by the lion is “Ne” or “no,” making it read “Plus Ultra.” Columbus had proven that there was indeed “more beyond.”

Compare this to the accomplishments of Jesus Christ.

Unlike Columbus, it cannot be said of Jesus Christ that He died disappointed without having realized the great scope of His achievement. With His dying breath, Jesus declared in victory, “It is finished!” He knew full well all that His death had accomplished. And He also knew that death would not have the final say. There was more beyond!

This is why the gospel is such good news to those who believe. The gospel shows us how the grave only leads to glory! By dying, Jesus Christ paid the penalty for my sin. And by rising from the grave, Jesus Christ has secured my salvation and given me eternal life.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most important event in human history. It is the fulcrum upon which all of history turns, for it literally changed the course of human history. **Jesus died, but Jesus is not dead**. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for sins and rose to life again. Therefore, those who trust in Him have no need to fear death.

The truth that Jesus conquered the grave is what gives confidence to our lives. It is what serves as the impetus in our mission. For this reason, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the lynchpin of Christianity. Without it, we would have no gospel. Nor would we have any hope for life beyond death. If Jesus Christ were not raised, the Bible says that we would still be in our sins. And those of us who believe would be, of all people, the most pitied. So it is the subject of death and resurrection that I want to take up this morning, beginning in Ecclesiastes 3.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon of Israel faces up to our fears by asking the hard questions of life, such as the meaning of the universe, the existence of God, and the nature of the life to come. The difficult question of death comes up here at the end of the third chapter. Solomon will pose a problem that doesn't seem to have an answer.

What will happen when I die? Is there any hope for me?

1. The REALITY of a future grave

When he considered life in this world, the Preacher was concerned by what he saw, especially death. He says in verse 16, "Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness." The phrase 'under the sun' is descriptive of the futility of life lived apart from God. What Solomon saw under the sun was wickedness and injustice, man's cruel treatment of his fellow man. It didn't seem fair. Even in the place where there ought to be justice, there was wickedness. Man couldn't even get things right in the halls of justice. The very

place where he most expected to see justice turned out to be a place of unfairness.

Nowhere do you see man's injustice more on display than at the cross of Jesus. There, we find the very worst of man and the very best of God.

When the halls of justice become corridors of corruption, where can righteousness be found? Solomon's frustration isn't simply that injustice is done, but that it seems to go unpunished. He longed for someone to make right what was wrong, to comfort the oppressed, and dry their tears.

He says in verse 17:

"I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work."

He comes to the conclusion that this life is an arena in which we are tested, a proving ground. Life is a test not simply in the sense of something we pass or fail, but also in the sense of something that demonstrates our character.

Notice verse 18:

"I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts."

He says that what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. Just as one dies, so also does the other. All have the same breath, all require oxygen to breathe, and all take their final breath. Then he says something that seems so out of place:

"Man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity."

That almost sounds like something right out of Darwin's book, right? This idea that man is nothing more than a highly advanced and evolved species. But keep

in mind that Solomon isn't saying that humanity is no different than the animals spiritually. He is making a physical comparison with regard to death. It is one of the Bible's strongest statements of the inevitability of death. His point is that people die, just like the animals.

A man has no control over the day of his death.

Job 14:14—“If a man dies, shall he live again?”

Throughout human history, perhaps no greater fear has existed in the minds of human beings than the fear of death and dying. In fact, the fear of death is the reason behind all sorts of other phobias. Ultimately, all of these fears come back to an underlying fear of death and the uncertainty it brings. Mankind has always sought some way to try and prolong his life by cheating death.

All of us want to prolong our days. None of us want to think about our mortality. And yet no matter how hard we try to ignore it, death is inevitable. Now I'm not trying to be morbid, but sooner or later, one day all of us will take our final breath. My heart will stop beating in my chest, my blood will cease to circulate throughout my body, and someone will make the pronouncement that I have died.

Death is no respecter of persons. No matter how successful of a person you are, no matter how many friends you have, and no matter how many people know your name, to the rich and to the poor, to the old and to the young—death comes to us all.

Thomas Gray—“*The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*”

You can spend your life trying to accumulate more stuff, all the while ignoring your mortality. But you cannot escape the fact that a future grave waits for you with your name etched on the tombstone.

This is the Preacher's point in verse 20:

"All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return."

It is a reference to the curse in Genesis 3. Because of sin, the Lord God said to Adam, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

When you think about the basic composition of the human body, you can literally see how this is the case. Scientists will tell you that 65% of your body is water. The remaining 35% consists of trace amounts of various elements. If you subtract the space that make up those atomic particles, you would barely show up under a microscope. In fact, if you remove all the space in the atoms that make up our physical bodies, the entire human race could fit in the volume of a sugar cube. Truly, we are but dust.

But deep down we know that there has to be more than this, right? That's the question posed in verse 21:

"Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"

Man is different than the animals in that he has a spiritual capacity to know God. We have eternity in our hearts, unlike the beasts. We're curious about what is beyond, yet we're powerless to save ourselves from death.

2. The CERTAINTY of a better resurrection

Since I can anticipate the reality of a future grave, I need the certainty of a better resurrection. Look at verse 22 and the last question of the chapter:

"So I saw that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?"

There is a question mark in Solomon's mind. He isn't sure about the life to come. How can we know for certain that we will live on after we die? If death is looming on the horizon, and if I am powerless over it, then my only hope is for someone to 'bring me to see' what will be next. But who is truly able to do that? It would have to be someone over whom death has no hold.

There are clues throughout the Old Testament:

Psalm 16:10-11—“For You will not abandon My soul to Sheol, or let Your Holy One see corruption. You make known to Me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Psalm 23:3-4—“He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...”

Psalm 49:15—“But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me.”

What is there is made plain by the New Testament truth of Christ's resurrection from the dead. I need someone to 'bring me to see' what will be next, someone who can rescue me from the grave. And the only One who can do that is the resurrected Son of God. By His own death and resurrection, Christ has overcome the clutches of death!

Jesus Christ willingly gave up His life by embracing death on the cross, and as such, has destroyed death's hold.

Hebrews 2:14-15—“That through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

Jesus broke the power of death held by Satan. Down through the centuries of time, the devil had a trump card when it came to death. The Law demanded:

Ezekiel 18:20—“The soul that sins, it shall die.”

And yet by the grace of God, Jesus Christ tasted death for every man and woman. By becoming obedient to the death of the cross, Jesus has taken death’s sting away by receiving the penalty of death in Himself. Anything that has its stinger removed cannot hurt me!

Not only did Jesus destroy death’s power through His own death, but He emptied the grave of its strength through His own bodily resurrection. (Paul’s point in **1 Corinthians 15**)

When Jesus was taken down from the cross, His body was prepared and buried in a tomb. At this point, His disciples are in hiding in the fear that the Jewish authorities would be coming to arrest them and perhaps they themselves would suffer the same fate. Even though Jesus had repeatedly told His disciples about His own resurrection, they didn’t understand. John says that their bewilderment stemmed from failure to understand the Scripture. Jesus had said:

John 2:19—“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

The Scripture said that Christ would rise again.

I often wonder how much we fail to see simply because we fail to understand the Scripture? So much of our frustration in life can be attributed to ignorance of the truth. Our lives are often spiritually impoverished because of our failure to spend time with God in His Word, sitting at Christ’s feet.

John’s account says that Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb, she’s weeping because she thought that the authorities had stolen the Lord’s body. All of the

sudden, what would later be revealed as two angelic messengers engage her in conversation, asking her why she was weeping.

John 20:13—She said to them, They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.

Verse 14 goes on to say that she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't recognize Him and merely supposed that He was the gardener. It is only as Jesus calls her name that she recognizes Him for who He is. Her eyes are opened, and she becomes the first eyewitness to the resurrection.

In just a matter of hours, the word began to circulate that Jesus had risen from the dead. The other gospels tell us that the religious leaders bribed the Roman soldiers that been placed on guard to say that the disciples had stolen the body while they slept. Other explanations throughout history have been:

- Jesus didn't die on the cross
- The women went to the wrong tomb
- The disciples stole the body
- The disciples were delusional

And yet all of the evidence that supports the resurrection is absolutely shocking. The New Testament records at least ten post-resurrection appearances of Jesus:

- to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18)
- to the other women at the tomb (Matthew 28:8-10)
- to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32)
- to Peter (Luke 24:34)
- to ten of the other eleven apostles (Luke 24:36-43)

- to all eleven apostles (John 20:26-31)
- to seven apostles on the shore of Galilee (John 21)
- to more than 500 at once (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- to James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- to the apostles at the ascension (Acts 1:3-11)
- to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-9)

The testimony of the gospel stands for itself, as there is plenty of evidence that leads to the truth that Jesus Christ, rather than the grave overwhelming Him, He overwhelmed the grave.

For the past 2,000 years all the way up to this very day, the ultimate question for the Christian faith and for our individual lives is this—Did Jesus Christ actually rise from the dead? Either He did, or He did not. If He did not rise, then we as Christians are wasting our time gathering here this morning. If He did not rise, our faith is nothing more than some made up superstition. If He did not rise, then there is no need for you to give sacrificially to His cause, no need for you to engage the world with His message, and no purpose behind our relationships with one another.

This is Paul's argument in **1 Corinthians 15:12-20**.

But if Jesus did in fact rise from the grave, then the situation is drastically different. If He did rise, nothing is more important than the proclamation of His message. If He did rise, His mission demands we sacrifice everything that we have. If He did rise, nothing is more important on earth than the local church. If He did rise, then there is hope for every man, woman, and child. Since this is true, it means that He also has secured the salvation of all who trust in Him.

1 Corinthians 15:1-2—“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

Notice that he says ‘by which you are being saved.’

If Christ is not risen, we have no message to proclaim. If Christ is not risen, we are still in sin. And if Christ is not risen, we are to be pitied as fools. But Christ IS risen, and is become the ‘first fruits’ of them that sleep.

The reality of a future grave is met with the certainty of a better resurrection, all because of...

3. The AUTHORITY of a risen Lord

See what Paul goes on to say in **1 Corinthians 15:21-25**.

As the risen Lord, He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death. John writes about that in Revelation:

Revelation 1:12-18—“Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around His chest. The hairs of His head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and His voice was like the roar of many waters. In His right hand he held seven stars, and from His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and His face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’”

It was a vision of unparalleled glory, undeserved grace, and unlimited government.

If you are a Christian, your life is secure. Your salvation is steadfast, kept by the enduring power of the living Christ. You have nothing to fear in life and death, for your future is secure. This is your confidence in life.

No need to fear Satan; he has been defeated. No need to fear death; it has already been conquered. Martin Luther expressed it well:

*And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever.*

There's no need to fear death, and there is no need to fear the encroaching darkness of the hour. Why? Because we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us, gave His life for us, and ever lives to make intercession for us.

There is no one here this morning who has not at some point felt the pain of death, perhaps while standing beside and looking down into an open hole in the ground, soon to be a loved one's grave. Like Solomon of old, people are saying, "Something's not right in the world. What's happening? What's wrong?"

When things like this happen, sometimes out of their pain and confusion, people will question God's existence. They will ask, "Where was God when I lost my husband? Where was God when I lost my child? Where was God when I was lonely and hurting? Where was He when I needed Him the most?" He was right there through His own death and resurrection.

The gospel means that He felt every ounce of heartbreak, felt every hot tear that streamed down your cheeks. The cross of Jesus was God experiencing every pain and every disappointment and every sorrow you have ever or will ever experience out of the broken existence of this fallen world we live in. He felt it all, He controls it all, and He is making all things new. And when tragedy and heartbreak strike, the likes of which we have never seen before, it is only the empty tomb of Jesus Christ that gives us hope.

John 11:25—"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live."

The promise upon which we stake our lives and hope is a Person. Jesus is my resurrection life, and no matter what happens to me in this life, or to the ones I love who are in Christ, I am safe and eternally secure. Because He lives...

I can face tomorrow!

All fear is gone!

Because I know He holds the future!

And life is worth living just because He lives!

Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death through His redemptive work. Therefore, for the believer in Jesus the grave only leads to glory. It is not ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Rather, it is glory to glory! Has the truth of Jesus Christ gripped your heart and changed your life? I'm talking about something that is far more than an abstract understanding. I am referring to personal application of this truth. I'm not talking about mentally assenting to a set of facts—I'm talking about personally surrendering your life to Christ. There is a huge difference.

Romans 10:9—“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

After having considered the depth of your need, your need of salvation from sin and death and the grave, have you come to personally believe that Christ is risen? Know that the gospel says that there is more involved here than just ascribing to the facts. All over the Bible belt, the majority of people will say that they believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but undoubtedly there are plenty of them who are not saved from their sins. Mere intellectual assent does not save. If you were to ask Satan himself if he believes the facts, he would say ‘yes.’

Scores of professing Christians have only believed half of Romans 10:9, and they think that they have been saved from their sins, when in reality they are not. They give lip-service to Jesus as Savior, but they have yet to surrender their life to Him as the Lord that He is, worthy of their worship and full devotion. The crucial question to be answered is this one—“Will you repent of your sin and surrender your life to Jesus Christ as Lord?”

Why not right now, on this Easter Sunday morning?

“Father, in the name of the risen Lord Jesus, I praise You for rescuing me from the grip of the grave! My hope is found in Christ alone. Open the eyes of those who have not yet come to faith. Save them now before it is too late, Lord! In Jesus’ name, Amen.”