

Theme: Sin and death have been conquered and we have victory through Christ.

The Gospel is often presented as the good news, for that is what it is. But before we can appreciate the good news for what it is, we have to truly comprehend what the bad news is first. Let's begin by tracing the steps of humankind at the very beginning, as recorded in Genesis 3. There we read that God said to the man and to the woman, "From any tree in the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat, because in the day that you eat from that tree, you will certainly die." Of course, we know the rest of the story. The man and the woman chose to do the one thing that God had commanded them not to do, and from that moment forward, sin took over.

The results of that act of disobedience were absolutely devastating. The forces of death took hold and the katabolic forces began to affect our world and all living creatures. Humans, animals, and all plant life would begin to get sick, weak, die and decay. Every living thing would undergo the process of decline from the moment it was born. Humans would experience what it is like to get sick, to feel weakness and pain, and to be haunted by the constant thought of death. Our world's organisms would undergo the process of disease and decay.

The world in this condition is described by Paul in Romans 8: 20, "For the creation itself was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the one who subjected it." The entire created order was made subject to a frustrated existence. Our world is marred, broken, twisted. Things don't operate the way that they're supposed to. It's decaying, it's dying. Moths and rust destroy; thieves break in and steal; it happens every day. Go ahead and wash your car and take care of your home. But know that your car will eventually break down and die and that your house will get old and fall apart. The beautiful yard that you have developed, unless you take constant care of it, will become overgrown with weeds and die. Nothing lasts forever. Sorry, but it's true.

But an even more subtle change emerged. Not only would our world and its inhabitants undergo the process of physical decay, but changes occurred in the moral atmosphere as well. As a result, everything in our world became twisted and warped morally. You see in the early chapters of Genesis as murder, adultery, deception, and violence became the norms. And this has been the case ever since, as every generation has experienced its own forms of depravity. We've seen it in the oppression of governments, through deceitful business practices, in the countless individual acts of perversity, violence, unfaithfulness, and fraud that have characterized our world. In fact, every single human being since the dawn of sin has experienced a natural bent toward corruption. You notice that whenever you have feelings of hatred or lust or envy or any other number of sinful tendencies. It's true, not that we're sinful because we sin, but that we sin because we're wicked.

So our world, since that fateful moment, has been overrun by the forces of sin and death. They're the smog that constantly looms over our world and our experience. That's the reason that any attempt to solve the world's problems through practical means is only effective in a limited way, like a band-aid that's put over a gaping wound. No social or political reform—however noble in itself—will ultimately solve the world's problems, although these things may need to be done in their own place. These things can only alleviate some of the symptoms and effects of our world's real problem, even though at the appropriate times and places these things are the best that can be done.

I think it's rather fascinating that with all of the problems that we have, with the disgusting acts of immorality and violence and perversion that happen every day, and with the obvious deep-seated corrupt tendencies that each one of us experience every day, there are still people willing to believe that people are basically good. The human problem of evil is much deeper than a lack of education or economic resources. Those things themselves are a part of the problem rather than the source of the problem. No matter how hard we try—no matter what has been tried through the history of the world, we just can't seem to get it right. Why? One word: sin. Sin isn't just what we do, it's what we are, it's the air we breathe, it's the water we drink, it's the language we speak, it's the clothes that we wear, it's with us and inside of us and around us and pervading us every moment of every day. Our world is broken not because of what God has done, but because of what we have done, because of what we have become.

For that reason, our world is constantly characterized by brokenness and darkness. Our world isn't what it's supposed to be, just as we're not what we're supposed to be. Whenever I see people who are what we often refer to as handicapped or challenged in some physical or mental way—especially children—I feel a tremendous sense of sadness. I've asked those questions that many of you ask: How could God allow such limitations and deformities upon such people? But I wonder if we realize how—in comparison with the likeness of what God wanted us to be, what true perfection really looks like—how handicapped each one of us are. Sin has permanently scarred our world and our existence and we don't truly know how twisted we are.

And the consequence of this condition is that rather than being innocent victims of a viscous disease, we're guilty because we have brought this condition upon ourselves. God had provided everything that we needed; we wanted for nothing. And we didn't obey the one thing which he had commanded. God had made his law known and we've broken it, and that law would stand in constant judgment against us.

The ultimate end of this kind of condition in the experience of each person is death—the cessation of all physical life permanently. This usually follows from a long period of decline and gradual weakening—your body gets older, you lose your energy and vitality, maybe you even become very sick and gradually lose your faculties and dignity. So death is a black cloud that constantly looms over my head as I know that it's something that I will eventually face, but it's also something that I have to face and fear for those I love. I have to say goodbye to people that I love because death has taken them from me. I have to be always concerned for those I love who are still with me because of an anxiety that something will happen to them and death will take them from me. That's what death has done to our world. It's a black cloud that perpetually hangs over our world and invades our whole experience.

You could say that sin and death are our mortal enemies, destined to war against us—because they're a part of us—and ultimately to overcome us and destroy us. There's no way that we can escape them or defeat them. They will have their way with us. We cannot win. The sad thing is that most people are totally oblivious to their true enemies and how things could be different.

That's the black backdrop before which the Gospel shines. You need to comprehend the bad news before you can appreciate the good news. As long as we live under the delusion that all is well, that people are basically good, that all we need is social reform or an adjustment in our educational system, and the world's problems will be taken care of, that God loves us all and that we'll all eventually be in heaven, the Gospel will never really hold an appeal for us. But if we understand that we ourselves are wicked through and through, that we stand guilty and condemned before God and subject to death and eternal separation from him because of what we've done, that our world is unalterably warped—only then will we feel a real need for good news.

Let me ask you to turn in your Bibles back to Romans 8:20. We read from this earlier, but we didn't finish the sentence. "The creation itself was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by the will of the One who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." That's the only hope which can truly save our world. Only then will the world truly look like it was supposed to look. No more brokenness; no more decay; no more frustration. A world truly given over to operating according to God's purposes. We can't even imagine such a world because everything we have known has been marked in some way by corruption. And this is exactly what the world longs for, as we read in the next verse: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

That pertains to the creation. What about our condition of wicked and guilty? Look at Colossians 2:13, "When you were dead in your trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations that stood against us, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Our condition? Dead, guilty, broken, condemned. God's answer? Redemption, liberation, conquering of all enemies. We're celebrating Independence Day in a few days. That was independence from an oppressive colonial power (my apologies to all English patriots). But it was limited. This speaks of a liberation from an eternal bondage and a deep-seated condition. It frees us from our true bondage and makes us truly free.

And those forces that are set against us—the authorities and powers, these have been publically disgraced through the victory of the cross. So the powers that are against us have been finally and utterly defeated. The guilt that looms over you like a threatening black cloud has been wiped away. The evil tendencies that constantly plague you and invest your life are being dealt with and will one day be reversed. No more irrational fears about God being against you, or the world being against you, or hostile unseen forces out to get you, or your sin and guilty haunting you. They've been beaten completely, never to rise again, through Christ, for your sake. That's true victory—V-day.

This is utter and complete victory also. The words that are used here speak of absolute annihilation. Paul's language is graphic and violent. Here's the essence of what he's saying. The setting begins in a courthouse and moves out to the battlefield. We were formally in the position of standing irrefutably condemned through our own wickedness. There were the charges against us, hanging right over our heads. We were justly accused and condemned. The cookie jar was empty and we had the brown smudge on the corner of our lip. Then God, rather than carry out the punishment, took the sentence and removed it. But he didn't just set it aside or file it away in order to review it at a later date. No, he disposed of it permanently by nailing it to the cross of his own Son. The sentence was carried out, but not against us. Through this, the sentence was obliterated entirely. He removed it; he took it out of the way; he nailed it to a wooden execution post so that it would never appear again. When Christ declared, "It is finished," he was pronouncing nothing less than the entire removal of the guilt of every person who would ever trust him. The brokenness of the universe, the moral backwardness of humankind, the lostness of creation was at one moment reversed through those three words (it is actually a single word in the Greek in which Jesus spoke).

Then we move to the battlefield. Those enemies—the spiritual powers and authorities—were irresistibly defeated. Then they were publically humiliated. What could be more devastating than that? Remember during the Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein's regime fell in a matter of days? His kingdom was utterly demolished, statues were leveled, his army was disintegrated. Then, after he fled in disgrace, following a period in which he was in hiding, he was finally found by American troops. He was

tried, condemned, sentenced, and, as the world watched, hung like a petty common criminal. Could you imagine a more devastating ruin than that? We often think of Christ dying on the cross as a dehumanizing disgrace. However, it was really the forces that are against us that were defeated, and the cross became an instrument of victory rather than of defeat.

Finally, death is overcome. As Christ overcomes death and the grave through the resurrection, so we also overcome them. Look at 1 Cor. 15:54-57, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Death stands as our great enemy, destined to claim each one of our lives and we cannot escape it. No matter who we are, what we've accomplished, how well we take care of ourselves, each one of us will eventually succumb to death's clutches. And it's like that black cloud that looms always over us. We must always be aware of our own eventual demise, and also surrender our loved ones to death's claim. Death stands against us as an irresistible and merciless tyrant.

Paul twice uses the word, "victory" in the passage we just read. The Greek word is *nikos*, from which we get Nike. He first asks, "Where, O death, is your victory?" It seems that death always claims the victory. Who can stand against it? But then he gives praise to God because he has given to us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. The victory has been taken from death and given to us through Christ. The victory is given to us now through the resurrected life that we will have in the Lord's presence following this life, and victory over death will ultimately take place when Christ claims his Kingdom in this world and death will be the last enemy that is done away with—as it says back in v. 26 of 1 Cor. 15.

That's a powerful comfort in times when death has affected our families and our lives. Memorial services are, unfortunately, a common part of our routines. As one who has had to stand between the family and the casket, it's very difficult to try and bring comfort to a family whose loved one clearly didn't know the Lord, or there isn't a strong assurance in the family's hearts. How much better it is when there is a strong assurance that that man or that woman lying there is now with the Lord, living life—true life—as it was meant to be lived.

This last week I met with a 47-year-old man who is dying of cancer. As the result of his condition (and this doesn't happen very often), he's come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This man has experienced dramatic changes in his life and character, he's accomplished powerful reconciliation in his family, and he's developed a marvelous intimacy with the Lord through this time in his life. He's dying of cancer and he's fully aware that his life in this world is short and that he'll soon succumb to the forces of death. Yet he knows that the Lord has a home in store for him. He trusts that his family will be there to join him eventually. And he knows that the Lord will be keeping him through this time until he leads him home. Death has been overcome. Death will not have the last say.

This Independence Day, we will have a lot of fun. We'll be celebrating the liberation of this nation from a domineering country and the birth of our own nation. But there's an even more powerful liberation that has taken place—more powerful than any political movement or social reform. It's a

liberation that goes to the core of our beings and lasts throughout eternity.