

The Rise and Fall of Death

Easter Sunday
1 Corinthians 15:54-58
Pastor Josh Black
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The Biography of Death

I want to begin this morning with a phrase from Romans 5:14 that's stuck in my mind this week: "From the time of Adam ... death reigned." We're living in days where it feels like death reigns. The coronavirus has now killed over one hundred thousand people. I'm sure you keep up with the news. But what doesn't get a lot of press is the fact that death's always front and center. Fifty-seven million people die each year. And even that statistic is misleading. The fact is we're all going to die. Our study of Psalm 90 taught us that much. And as C.S. Lewis has said, 100% of people die; the percentage can't be increased. So, as you can see death seems to reign. And its empire is quite large.

Last week, Psalm 96 taught us that Christ is king. He's on his throne reigning. And all things have been put under his feet. But it feels like death is reigning.

A few years back, Princeton University Press put out a series of biographies called Lives of Great Religious Books. It's an interesting concept. A biography writes the life of somebody. But this series traces the lives of books. But books aren't technically living things. And neither is death. But this morning I want to do something even more ironic than write the biography of a book. I want to give the biography of death. The life of death, if you will.

Many great biographies are structured around the rise and the fall of a person. The best biography on Elvis comes in two volumes. The first deals with the rise of Elvis. The second, his fall. Or maybe you're familiar with Gibbon's history of Rome, *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In a time when death seems to be extending its empire, I want to trace the rise and fall of death.

First Corinthians 15 tells us of the rise and the fall of death. I'm not going to cover the whole chapter. I mainly want to focus on the last five verses. Some stories start at the end and then flashback to see how the characters came to be. And then eventually join back up to the final scene. These are called frame stories. We have examples in Homer's *Odyssey* or Shelley's *Frankenstein*. That's what I want to do this morning with the biography of death. I want to begin by reading the final chapter in death's biography. Then we'll flashback to the beginning and trace death's rise to power and ultimate doom. At the end, we'll consider what difference this makes for our lives.

1 Corinthians 15:54-58¹

⁵⁴*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*"Death is swallowed up in victory."
⁵⁵"O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?"*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁶*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷*But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁵⁸*Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

So that's the last chapter in death's bio. Death will be defeated. Death will fall. And that's what we celebrate on Easter morning. But before we can celebrate death's fall, we first have to see just how high the rise of death has been in our world.

THE RISE OF DEATH

So, let's flashback for a moment. Let's look at death's origins and death's rise.

The Birth of Death

Death is not eternal. It had a beginning. We read about the birth of death in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve were created by God to live in relationship with him. They were promised rich blessings. Eternal access to the tree of life. But this blessing would only last as long as they obeyed God. And God had commanded them to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he warned them that if they disobeyed his command they would die (2:17).

As you know, they did not obey God. They rebelled against his reign (3:6). And so, death was born, so to speak. Friends, it's important to say at the get go that death is not simply a natural process. It's God's penalty on man's sin.² So, who gave birth to death? Adam and Eve.

First Corinthians 15:21 says, "by a man came death." It was through Adam's sin that death came into the world. That's why verse 56 says, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." The phrase "the sting of death" could also be translated "the stinger of death." A scorpion or a bee uses its stinger to bring about the death of its victim. In the same way, sin is the stinger that brings about the death of man.³ When Adam and Eve sinned, the deadly stinger penetrated their lives. And now death has invaded our world. But it wasn't Adam and Eve alone who sinned. We all sin.

Romans 5:12 explains this. It says, "Therefore ... sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned." Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death." And death is not just physical mortality; death is eternal. Instead of eternal life, there's eternal condemnation in hell for all who sin against God.⁴

The Rise of Death's Reign

So that's how death was born. But how did death rise to power, and how does it exercise its reign over us? When verse 56 says "the sting of death is sin," there's likely a double meaning to the sting of death. Sin is the stinger that *leads* to death. But there are also many things in our lives that give a

² John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, Understanding the Bible Commentary

³ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

foretaste of death.⁵ And those things sting. They hurt. And they continue to remind us of death's reign.

Where do I get this? Well, have you ever noticed in Genesis 3, when man sins, the curse of death doesn't come immediately? But many aspects of the curse *do* show up immediately. And they remind us death is coming. And they are the way death exercises its reign over us. The *fall* leads to the *rise* of death's tyranny. Let me share a number of examples with you, to explain the way death's empire works.

When Adam and Eve sinned what happened? First, they felt shame (v. 7) and then fear (v. 8). Shame for their sin and fear of God's judgment. We still experience shame and fear. They enslave us in many ways (Heb. 2:15)!

The curse also led to an ongoing battle against Satan. God said there would be ongoing enmity between humanity and Satan's offspring (v. 15). We still engage in that battle today. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:12). This is one of the many ways that death exercises its reign.

We also experience pain. The curse on Eve involved pain in childbearing (v. 16). And the curse on Adam involved pain in work (vv. 17-19). But these are only a sample of the pain we experience this side of the fall. There's also the pain of grief. The pain of sickness and disease. And all of these are a foretaste of death.

Additionally, we experience conflict in human relationships. The curse brought strife between Adam and Eve (vv. 12, 16). But today we experience conflict in all human relationships, not just marriage. Broken relationships are the sting of death.

And above all, our relationship with God is broken. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden (v. 24). They could no longer walk in relationship with God. And in our sin, we too are separated from God and will be for eternity. This is spiritual death.

And here's the thing: It's not just sin that leads to death. Our spiritual death leads to more sin. What's the first thing that happens after man is banished from God's presence in the garden? Sin spreads like wildfire.

In Genesis 4, sin's crouching at Cain's door. And he murders his brother. Then after, we're told repeatedly in Genesis 5 about the pervasiveness of death. Genesis 6 tells us about the pervasiveness of sin: "The wickedness of man was great in the earth, and ... every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5).

Our spiritual death goes hand-in-hand with sin. Ephesians 2 says, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." Do you see? Our spiritual *death* effects how we *live*. Instead of following God's ways, we live in sin. We "[follow] the course of this world, [we follow] the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." We live "in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and [are] by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind" (vv. 1-3).

⁵ Hartley

There's so much more that can be said, but hopefully this brief treatment makes my point clear. Following death's birth, death rose quickly to power. Its tyrannical reign spread to all people, in all times. And it not only leads all people to the grave. It dominates us with shame and fear, with pain and frustration, with brokenness and alienation, and piles sin upon sin.

THE FALL OF DEATH

Now that we've looked at death's rise, let's turn to consider its fall. Like the fall of the Roman Empire, the fall of death's empire doesn't happen quickly. It comes in stages.

Predictions

The fall of death began with predictions and prophecies. When death first entered the world, when it was still in the hospital with Adam and Eve, getting weighed and measured, there was already a prediction of its doom. In Genesis 3:15, God said that the offspring of Eve would crush the head of the serpent. Satan uses sin and death to keep us in bondage. But at the very beginning we have a promise of Satan's defeat.

We see many other indications in the Old Testament that death will be defeated. But for the sake of time, I'm going to limit myself to one more example, referenced in our passage in 1 Corinthians 15. Verse 54 says, "When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'" This saying comes from Isaiah 25:8.

Let me read a few other verses from Isaiah 25 so you can get a sense for its tone:

Isaiah 25:7-9

⁷*And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
⁸He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
⁹It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."*

It's interesting. This passage not only predicts the joyous defeat of death. But right there with that prediction, it announces the defeat of the sting of death. The defeat of sadness and shame. The elimination of tears and reproach. Death is intimately connected with the tyranny of death. But it will *all* be defeated on the day Isaiah announces. A day the people in the Old Testament were waiting for. And a day we're waiting for as well.

Christ's Resurrection

But here's the good news. The coming of that day's been guaranteed through Jesus Christ. And that's why we celebrate Easter this morning. First Corinthians 15:20 says that "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Christ's resurrection points forward

to the day of *our* resurrection. Because all who are in Christ will be raised from the dead, just like Christ was raised. And when we're raised from the dead, when our perishable bodies put on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory" (v. 54).

The order's laid out in 1 Corinthians 15:21-23: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."

We've spent a lot of time talking about the sting of death. But let's not miss the bigger reality. Let's not miss the victory of the resurrection! The sting of death is sin ... but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ (v. 56)!

Christ's death and resurrection have accomplished victory over death. We still experience the reign of death now, because the fall of death happens in stages. But when Christ returns, those who are in Christ will be raised from the dead. And we will experience Christ's victory over death.

How's this possible? Well, Christ has taken the stinger out of death. Remember the sting of death is sin. Our sin is what leads to our death. But as 1 Corinthians 15:3 says, "Christ died for our sins." He paid the penalty for our sins. He's taken the stinger out.

Mike Andrus has a great illustration on this. The word sting can mean a number of different things. Obviously, it means to puncture with a poisonous dart. But another way the word sting is defined is to overcharge, cheat, or con someone.

Some of you may remember the 1973 movie *The Sting*, starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman. Redford and Newman were con men. They were grifters. And in the end, they pull off an amazing sting operation. They con the mob boss, the ultimate con man. They ripped off the thief.

The greatest sting operation in all of history is the one pulled off by Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the cross, I'm sure Satan and death thought they'd conned God. Satan had finally won. Death had conquered the greatest man in history. But, in fact, in that very event, Jesus was conning the con man. Through his death he took the stinger out of death. And through his resurrection he dealt death the fatal blow.

Sure, death is still alive and kicking. We know that full well. But death's days are numbered. The last chapter in death's authorized biography has already been written in the resurrection of Jesus. And it will be played out when he returns. Not only has death been defeated. Death will actually one day die!

The day's coming when death will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). Then, as Revelation 21 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (v. 4).

RESPONSE

Whenever you read a good book, you should try to apply that book to your life. And now that we've surveyed the biography of death, we'd do well to ask how we should apply it to our lives. Our passage this morning gives us two applications, in verses 57-58.

Verse 57 says, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ.” The clear response here is to thank God for victory over death. But there’s another response implied. We need to realize that only God can give victory over death. And that victory comes only through Jesus Christ.

All of us have sinned. And all of us will therefore die. And *none of us* can do anything about it. We may try to ward off death through diet and exercise or modern medicine. But the fact remains, we’re all going to die. And we’ll all meet our maker. We may also try to ward off the sting of death. We may try to minimize sadness and shame and grief and loneliness through various means. We pour ourselves into our work or into relationships. We numb our pain through food and drink or worse.

And many of these things are good. But when we look to them to do for us what only God can do—to save us and satisfy us—then we’re not actually escaping the sting of death at all. We’re only burying the stinger deeper.

Our only hope against the tyranny of death is to trust in Jesus Christ. He died for our sins. He was raised from the dead. It’s only through him that we can have victory. So, we need to trust in him. We need repent of our sin and believe the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1). That’s the first way to respond to the biography of death.

The second way is found in verse 58: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

The doctrine of our future hope should affect the way we live our present lives.⁶ And we have great hope. We have great security in the resurrection of Christ. These perishable bodies will put on the imperishable, the mortal will put on immortality (v. 54). Then we will inherit the kingdom of God (v. 50). And our inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, and kept in heaven for us (1 Pet. 1:4).

That security should lead to a stability in our lives.

We don’t need to be shaken by the coronavirus or economic upheaval. We are eternally safe and wealthy.

We don’t need to be threatened by opposition to the gospel. We need to give ourselves to the work of the Lord. Because we know that what we do for Jesus now is not in vain. Friends, now’s not a time to hide away and put our lives on pause. Now’s not a time to fear. Now is a time to hunker down. Now’s a time to declare the good news.

Death is defeated. He is risen! Now’s the time to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed. For our witness now will have bearing on the eternal future of people.

So, in light of the resurrection, let me close where Paul closes: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*