

Sermon 190: Romans 14:9: Lord of the living and the dead

OUTLINE

Views on death
Victory in death

INTRODUCTION

We all know the famous question 1 of the WFC, but fewer know the more pastoral and comforting first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Q. What is thy only comfort in life and death? A. That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without that will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.' This is the wonderful truth that Paul is pursuing in addressing the Romans now in Romans 14. The situation Paul is addressing is very particular but the truth that he draws on to solve the problem is the same, it is the Lordship of Jesus in the life and death of His people. 14:9, 'For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.'

I want you to imagine that the problem of brethren judging and despising each other in the Roman church is a walnut. And instead of bringing in a nutcracker to address the problem, Paul brings a sledgehammer. I want you to note Paul's pastoral method. Here he has a problem, divisions based on judging and despising. How will he address this problem? He does not merely tell them to stop it! He does not depend upon shaming and humiliating them. He uses the opportunity to remind them of important theological truths and helps them see the implications of those truths. He plies them with the teaching of Christ's Lordship. By bringing this small problem to a big doctrine various implications have presented themselves. The implication that we must stop assuming that we are the boss of another when we all stand before Christ. The implication that we cannot force a person's conscience to obey man's will lest it result in sin. The implication that when a person differs from us who is not violating a clear command of scripture, but they are doing what they are doing to the glory of God, let them be. You will often hear people talking about how they don't like theology because they are practical people, that we must stop talking about doctrine which divides but be useful. Here we see that Paul begins with theology and doctrine and how it moves outward to good practice. Here we are looking at a very real problem of division and instead of a ten step program of how to fix it Paul instead models for them a way to think where they will be able to solve all their own problems in the same way in the future. He teaches them how to think not only what to do.

I love preaching through Paul's writings for this reason, for every time he deals with a little problem he stops and tells you about a big doctrine, you not only get your problem solved but you come away worshipping and having been taught a lesson in how to think better. The verse before us is just such a verse, you come away with more than you bargained for. Paul is getting these Romans to see that their brothers and sisters who differ with them should not be judged because they are not violating any clear command, but they are worshipping God. Paul is in the middle of us thinking about how we are to worship Christ in all we do because Christ is Lord. V9 is a purpose statement, 'For to this end Christ died and lived again.' The whole reason Christ came and died and rose was to secure the purchase

of His people that we might belong to Him and honour Him in all we do. The implication is, since your brethren who you differ with are doing this, stop judging and despising them. Today I want to look more at the sledgehammer than the walnut. We have seen the problem and how Paul solves it, but he always seems to add so much information about Christ and His work. It is as if Paul's heart is overflowing with the wonder of Christ's work and its sufficiency that as soon as he starts talking about it, he can't stop himself. So today I want to focus on the overflow of Paul's thought which only has a tangential bearing on the topic at hand. Paul's words keep extending beyond Christ being the Lord of the living to being our Lord in death and the Lord of the dead as well. The fact that Christ is the Lord of the dead is part of what makes Christ the judge, this will come up next, but for now I want to linger on the thought that Christ is the Lord of the dead. So today I want to focus on death and how Christ is the Lord over it. We will look at this in two parts. We will look at the various views of death, and then we will look at how Christ is victorious over death.

Views of death

What is death? In the text here we are told that we will die, that Christ died and rose again, and now He is the Lord over death. What is our understanding of this ubiquitous and inevitable reality we must all meet? There are different answers to this question. Our present culture is in the throes of trying to cast off all traditional views of death and have a purely scientific view. You will find many endorsing the notion that death is not the end of life, but a part of life, it is natural, and therefore like anything else in life it ought to be embraced and not feared. Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that anyone who faced death without fear is a liar. But many are attempting to make little of death and even teach children that it is a good and necessary thing. In the Lion King it is called, 'the circle of life'. Where we die and return to the earth to give other things life. 'Philosopher Peter Kreeft recounts the story of a seven-year-old boy whose cousin died at the age of three. He asked his mother, 'Where is my cousin now?' She did not believe in God or the afterlife, and so she could not with integrity talk to him about heaven. Instead she followed the modern secular narrative. 'Your cousin has gone back to the earth,' she said, 'from which we all come. Death is a natural part of the cycle of life. And so when you see the earth put forth new flowers next spring, you can know that it is your cousin's life that is fertilizing those flowers.' How did the little boy respond? He screamed, 'I don't want him to be fertilizer!' and ran away screaming.¹ Peter Kreeft argues that telling people that death is just another natural part of growth is like telling a quadriplegic that paralysis is just another part of exercise. Instinctively we know it is wrong. Death is not natural but unnatural. It is not falling asleep. Someone has pointed out that if anyone were to force someone to be unconscious, that would be considered a criminal act. Or if anyone stole you from your life, joys, relationships so that you never had them again, that would be considered a terrible cruelty. The widespread idea that death is good and natural is a novelty in history and robs the modern person of the ability to properly respond to what it really is. They feel the loss but tell themselves it is not a loss.

If not the aspiritual materialist view that when your dead you are dead we are also seeing a spread of the Eastern view of death. The Eastern view sees a series of reincarnations climaxing in the loss of your individuality as you are swallowed up into the one. Personhood disintegrates into depersonalised being. Every soul a part of the divine is on a pilgrimage through the various lives of reincarnation to be reconciled to the One. Those who have rejected the materialist view of death, but also the Christian one have opted into this one taught by Buddhism, Hinduism, and the New Age Movement. This view built on the

¹ Keller, Making sense of God, p161.

assumption that this creation is an illusion or that it is evil in and of itself sees the escaping of the pain as the highest goal. They do not see creation as created sinless to begin with but then suffering the effects of the fall, they do not see a future where this world will be recreated anew, they seek escape from pain, escape from connection, escape from relationship and see death as the great escape into nothingness where we lose ourselves in non-feeling, in non-personhood. This view depersonalises God who we instinctively know to be a person. It devalues love and relationships trivialising all we know to be important as dross. It denies your individuality and personhood. True rest is non-creativity, non-relationships, non-community, non-feeling, non-thinking, non-enjoying. Everything in our hearts cries out against such a barren view of true peace and rest.

Let's talk then about the biblical view of death and how Christ is Lord over it. These two views have the wrong view of death, on the one hand we have the error of those who think that man made in the image of God is made naturally to die: death is not natural. And the other hand we see others seeing death as the doorway of escape from an embodied experience. The Christian view is that death is a tragedy turned to triumph. When God made man in His image He made man with a never dying soul. Some argue over whether there was death in the animal and insect world before the fall, that is not important, what is important is that there was no death among mankind when God first made them. Our first human parents sinned. And the bible explains that those who sin against forfeit their lives for their crimes, the wages of sin is death. Sin against such a great God results in the ultimate punishment—death. God did not make man to die, death has come upon the human race as a judgement for sin. God made man to live but we sinned and so experience death as we receive our fallen condition from our first parents. God made human beings not to be another part of the fertilising food chain where we die and give our nutrients to the earth to ensure ongoing life. No we were made to rule the earth on God's behalf and develop it and cultivate it for His glory and in accordance with His will.

The effects of sin upon us include frailty where we progressively press towards death and are vulnerable to sickness. It involves being stillborn spiritually and separated from God. It involves the separation of soul and body when we die, two things which make up our persons which God intended should not be separated. And so the bible speaks of death negatively as a punishment, that it is an enemy 1 Cor. 15:26, and something that is a terror to us Heb. 2:16. And from the beginning God promised a person who would be born to a woman who would undo what the devil has done. God made promises of a Saviour who would remove all the causes of death and grant us access to the tree of life Adam never got to eat.

In the NT we see what our attitude to death ought to be, we see it in Jesus Christ at the graveside of His friend Lazarus. In John 11:17-44 we are told about Jesus mourning over the death of his friend. In the face of death he is not indifferent as if it were a good or natural thing. He speaks appropriately to the mourning sisters depending on their needs. To the more practical and thoughtful Martha Jesus speaks truth; to the more emotional Mary, Jesus weeps in empathy with her. John 11:33-35, 'When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus wept.' In verse 33 we see two emotions, 'deeply moved' indicates a strong passion of anger, and his weeping signals His sorrow. Jesus here shows us the two appropriate emotions in the face of death, anger because death is a ripping away of life and loved ones, an unnatural end to life which should be raged against, and sorrow for the loss and in sympathy with those who have suffered the loss. Even though as Christians we are guaranteed hope in death, we still mourn but with hope, 1 Thess. 4:13-14, 'But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve

as others do who have no hope.¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.' And so when the church in Acts suffers the martyrdom of Stephen they mourn, Acts 8:2, 'Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.' Death is the great enemy, the endless eater, the inescapable conqueror, we are its victims not its friends. It is a tyrant and we are oppressed by it.

Why must we stress this point? We cannot trivialise death. One theologian puts it this way, 'downplaying the seriousness of the foe [death] only trivialises the debt that was paid and the conquest that was achieved at the cross and the empty tomb.'² Death is not good, it is a tragedy, and only in Christ is it a tragedy turned to triumph and used for good.

Victory in death

Our text tells us that 'Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of the dead and of the living.' Now the wording in this verse could serve to speak of all dead and living people, both believers and unbelievers. However, given the focus on believers throughout the context it is likely that Paul is stressing how Jesus is the Lord of His people in life and in death. This is a bracketing statement implying all of our lives come under His Lordship and control. This Lordship where we know Christ's authority but also His care and power is not only for this life but extends into death as well. Christ's jurisdiction is not only in this life but in all times and places. Death which is a great power you and I cannot overcome, He has overcome and rules in it. Paul is referring not to the Lordship Christ has by virtue of Creation and as the second person of the Trinity. No, Paul is speaking of Christ's Lordship that has resulted from His resurrection and He has by virtue of His finished work as the Second Adam. This authority which Christ received is spoken of in places like Matt. 28:18, 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' Phil. 2:8-9, 'And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.' This authority that Christ received at His resurrection includes authority over death, Rev. 1:17-18, '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.'

Let us think about how Christ rules over death for our sake. Paul in speaking about the future glorification of believers writes in 1 Cor. 15:55-56, "'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 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.' Here we are told that death kills us, but in killing us it has a poisonous sting—sin. And sin is the most terrible part of dying because of the law. In other words, the worst thing that can happen to you in death is not to die a long and painful death but to die in your sins. For waiting on the other side is a Holy God who judges your deeds against His law. But here we are being told that death has lost its sting through Jesus Christ. Here is the picture I have in my mind. Imagine death as this gigantic killer bee, Christ comes forward to stop the bee from stinging us, he offers his own body to be stung. But just as the bee goes to sting Christ He grabs the sting and pulls it into His own body and He pulls the sting out of the bee and all its insides come spilling out. And just as a bee who has stung someone will die, so now Christ has drawn the sting from death, it has no poison left for us, and now death itself must die. In the same way where we should have stood before God as a judge to be

² Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p911.

condemned for our sins, and the wages of sin is death. Christ took our place and allowed the judgement for our sins to fall on Him. The law is fully satisfied, our sins are paid for in full. If the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin in the fact that we must be judged by the law. The good news is that Jesus stood trial in our place and took our punishment, and now there is no condemnation for those who believe in Christ.

But that is not all. He not only paid the price He owns the keys of death. Death holds no permanent power over those who are His. Death the great mystery and prison is overcome for the Christian. How? The best way to see how a Christian will triumph through death is by remembering that we are united to Christ, and all that is true for Christ, the way He went through death is the way you and I will go through death as well. As goes the Head so goes the body, as goes the King so goes the kingdom. This reality is bound up in a few key ideas. The first is the idea of firstfruits, 1 Cor. 15:20, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.' Fallen asleep in this verse refers to the Christians experience of death, and the idea of Jesus being the firstfruits means that He is the beginning of a larger harvest. The second idea is found in Romans 8:29 where Paul speaks about Christ being the firstborn of many brothers, with a view to all that follow being conformed to His image. Christ who is fully God is also fully man, He is human in every way we are apart from sin. He had a frail body that could die, but when He died He resurrected in a body that can now never die, a glorified body. We are united with Christ in order that we may be conformed to Christ's present glorified human existence. He is the firstborn but we will be the second, third, fourth, etc.

But there is more, what happens when we die? What happened to Christ happens to us. When Jesus died He told the thief on the cross that He would see him in paradise that same day. And Jesus when He died committed His spirit to His Father. The idea that Jesus went to go and suffer in hell for three days is not true and a late addition to the apostle's creed. No, just like you and I Jesus had a human body and a human soul. When He died His human soul went to heaven to the presence of God while His human body stayed in the ground. He was in a state of peace and rest in the presence of God as a disembodied spirit. But the goal of salvation is not heaven, but a new creation in a sinless body and so Jesus was not left in heaven as a spirit without a body but was returned to His body, but the body He was returned to was no longer the frail one that could die, but the new body which you and I will receive in the new creation. Christ is the trail blazer and the prototype, and we will all go through death as He has done so. He went into death and tore off the doors so that His people could go through with Him. When you die, if you are a believer your spirit will leave your body and be taken into the direct presence of God. 2 Cor. 5:8, 'Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.' When we are absent from the body we are present with the Lord. And so we see death as Paul did, as 'gain.'

You do not go into a soul sleep, nor are you annihilated, nor is there a fiery purgatory waiting for you. Christ is the Lord of His people and He holds the keys of death. When you die He will take you to Himself in heaven, you are united to Christ, your life is hidden in Christ in God. When you die you will not be snatched from His hand but will experience a glorification in your spirit and well in perfect peace in His presence. And there you will stay away from satan, sin and death awaiting the day He will come again, then you will return with Him, be resurrected into your glorified bodies with all the saints and you will enter into the New Creation to live in a world with no death. But those who do not trust in Christ, must face death with the sting still in it, they will die in their sins and have to face God's judgement for themselves. They too will be conscious after death in a holding cell where they will experience torment, and when Jesus comes again they will face Him in the

judgement and then go to eternal hell. In Christ death is a tragedy turned to triumph but for those who have not trusted in Christ it is merely the first death which leads to a greater more permanent state of death. Let this be a warning, trust in Christ, flee the wrath to come.