

SOMETHING GOOD HAS HAPPENED TO DEATH



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REFORMED  THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A mind for truth. A heart for God

*A Message Delivered in 1974
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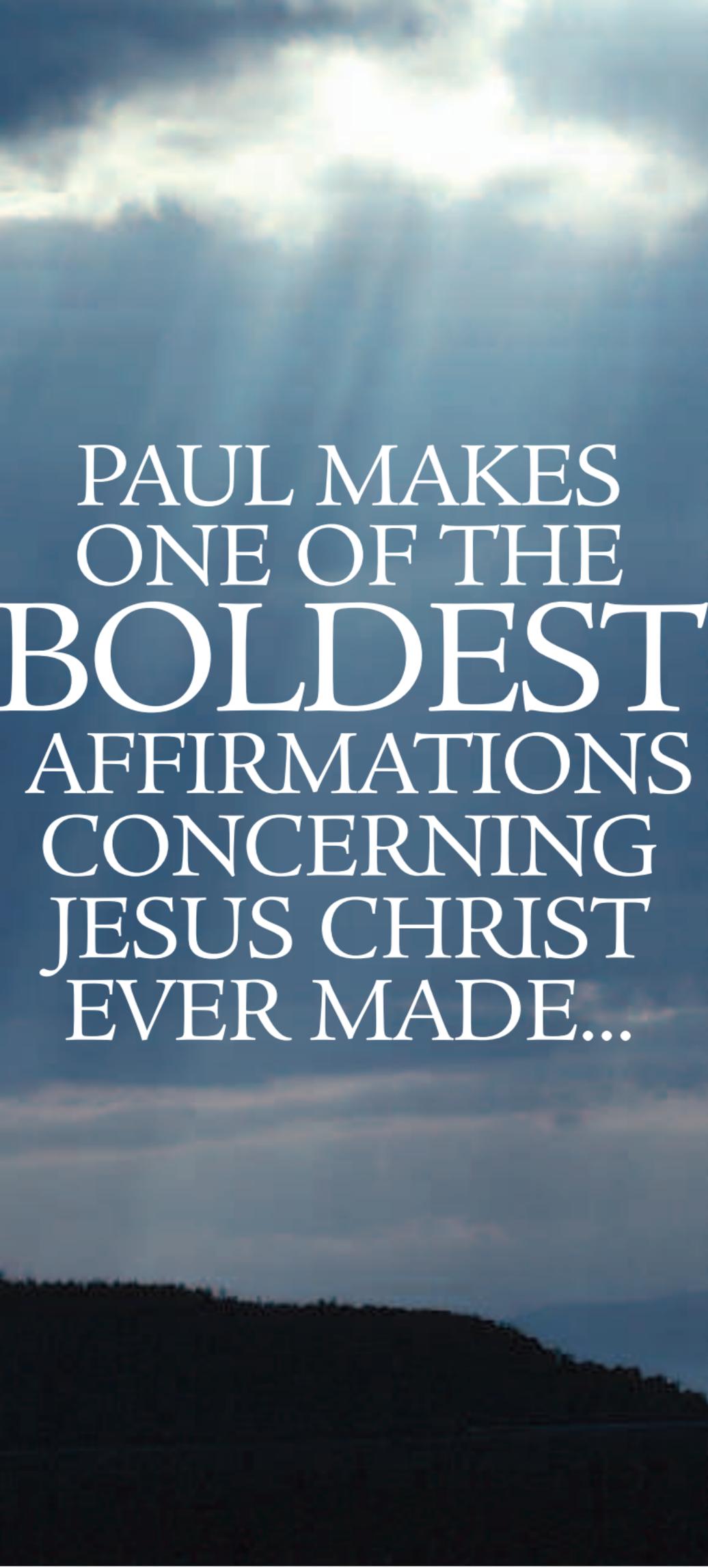
* The terminology used here is suggested by the intriguing title
of a definitive treatise on the atonement by John Owens,
The Death of Death in the Death of Christ.

SOMETHING GOOD HAS HAPPENED TO DEATH

-II Timothy 1 and 4

Paul seemed to talk as a madman. Everyone knows that death is sad news, bad news, not glad news. Yet the apostle called the death of the One he loved most “good news”. He believed that Jesus’ death did something good to death and filled the death of His people with good news.

Paul’s last contribution to the canon of Scripture is his second letter to Timothy. In the opening sentences he speaks of the death of death accomplished by Christ;* in the closing sentences he speaks of his own death as a disciple of Christ.



PAUL MAKES
ONE OF THE
BOLDEST
AFFIRMATIONS
CONCERNING
JESUS CHRIST
EVER MADE...

The DEATH of Death

Not only is the sixth sentence in this epistle three verses long (II Timothy 1:8-10), it is also massive in the dimensions of its message. Here Paul makes one of the boldest affirmations concerning Jesus Christ ever made. In the same sentence, and in this connection, Paul pens a most devastating declaration about death. In verse 10, he gives death's obituary.

Who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our own works but in virtue of His own purpose and grace which He gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, Who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel

— (II Timothy 1:9-10).

Paul declares that the destruction of death has been accomplished. He proclaims that the deathblow to death has been dealt by Jesus Christ. He has “abolished” death! He has wrecked, ruined, and broken death. The phrase used may be translated thus: “He destroyed death.” One commentator affirms that the thought can be rendered thus: “He has annihilated death.”

Is Paul's statement true? Is he here carried away by his feelings into an inflated statement that is excessive and exaggerated? We answer these questions. Yes, the statement is true. No, the statement is not an exaggeration. Paul's statement is deliberate, factual, and substantive. It is not an expression of emotional extravagance. It is in keeping with the principle of integrity practiced by Paul in his writing and preaching; that is, to “refuse to practice cunning...but by

open statement of the truth we could commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (II Corinthians 4:2).

Can we attend the funeral of a true believer in Jesus Christ today, see the evidences of death's reality – the lifeless body, the casket, the grave – and still claim that Christ has dealt the death-blow to death? The answer is yes. Paul speaks the truth. This truth is best declared in the very presence of death. It is in the letter announcing his own impending death that Paul declares that death has been fatally struck.

Elsewhere, the apostle explains what he means regarding death's death. He does this in such passages as I Corinthians 15. He shows that death received its fatal blow from the death, the resurrection, and the forthcoming return of Jesus Christ.

For I delivered unto you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...then at His coming... comes the end, when He delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority in power. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Thanks be to God Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ

— (I Corinthians 15:3-4, 23-24, 26;
Romans 7:25).

The sting of death is sin, Paul declares (I Corinthians 15:56). Sin brings death to man's relationship with God and enforces separation from God in this life and in the life to come. But Christ has taken sin's sting for His people.

He has taken sin altogether out of the death of believers because He Himself has borne sin's condemnation, penalty, and judgment on their behalf in His own death on the cross.

*He Himself bore our sins on the tree,
that we might die to sin and live to right-
eousness. By His wounds we are healed*

— (1 Peter 2:24).

*That through death He might destroy him
who has the power of death, that is the
devil, and deliver those who through fear
of death were subject to lifelong bondage*

— (Hebrews 2:14c-15).

Christ having borne our sins has removed this separation and has reconciled and united us to God in total and eternal forgiveness both in this life and in the life to come. Now, even physical death cannot separate us from God.

*For I am sure that neither death...nor
anything else in all creation can separate
us from the love of God in Christ Jesus
our Lord*

— (Romans 8:38-39).

Christ has made death His handyman and has reduced death to a servant who can only open the door to heaven for Christ's people and so fulfill Christ's request:

*“Father, I desire that they also, who thou
hast given Me, may be with Me where I
am, to behold My glory which Thou hast
given Me in Thy love for Me before the
foundation of the world”*

— (John 17:24).

The redeeming death of Christ having removed sin from the account of those who belong to Him also removes sin's force so that death must usher their souls (self-conscious personalities) immediately into the glory of heaven.

The power of the grave has been broken in Christ's resurrection. He submitted to all that death and the grave could do for three days. Then, as Samson snapping the vines, He broke the bonds of death and stepped out of death and the grave and into the life of this world alive and risen! In so doing, He ripped the sinews, tore the tendons, cut the muscles, and broke the bones of the hand of the grave and so relieved its grip and grasp that it is no more than a temporary caretaker of the bodies of His people. The grave is, for them, no more than His depository in His good earth. It retains the bodies of His own, their souls being in heaven, until He comes in glory to raise them and endow them with bodies equipped for eternity.

*We await a Savior; the Lord Jesus
Christ, Who will change our lowly body
to be like His glorious body, by the
power which enables Him even to
subject all things to Himself*

— (Philippians 3:20-21).

The Death of a BELIEVER

In the fourth chapter of his second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of his own expected death. He is in prison in Rome. He expects to be executed for his witness to Christ. He speaks words of confidence, comfort, and realism about his death. There is no fear. Though he will die, he will continue to live in the full benefits of Christ's triumph over death. Death is there, but does not darken the horizon of his future.



THERE IS
NO FEAR.
DEATH IS THERE
BUT DOES NOT
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OF HIS
FUTURE.

For I am already at the point of being sacrificed; the time of departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award me at that day; and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing

—(II Timothy 4:7-8).

In speaking of his impending death, Paul uses certain phrases that tell us some things about his own death, which we believe to be true as basic principles regarding the death of all who truly belong to Jesus Christ by grace through saving faith.

NOTE these three facts: a believer's death is never untimely, never evil, and never fatal.

Paul's death was not untimely, nor is the death of any true believer. It is never premature or tardy. Paul says: "The time for my departure has come." The time is God's time. Paul speaks of his life as a "race", and he does not conceive of it as being interrupted and cut short by death. He has "finished" that race. Many at that time may have felt that Paul's life was being cut off at the zenith of its power and was being cut short prematurely before his work was completed. This was not Paul's viewpoint. His faith, and ours, affirms:

But I trust in Thee, oh Lord, I say, Thou art my God. My times are in Thy hand

— (Psalm 31:14-15a).

He works all things after the counsel of His own will

— (Ephesians 1:11b).

Your life is hid with Christ in God

— (Colossians 3:3).

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints

— (Psalm 116:15).

Our Good Shepherd is sovereign. His hand saves, keeps, cares for, guides, and protects His sheep. They are never “snatched” from His hand, not even by an untimely death. Rather, their “departure” as Paul calls the believer’s death, is God’s call to glory in His time.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand

— (John 10:27-28).

For some of God’s people, the race of life seems to be a very short one, while for others it appears to be very long – measured by years. We are comforted by His Providence and know that, though we may not understand it, His purpose is fulfilled in whatever span of life He allots to us on earth. Consider our Savior. Prior to His death, He said, “My hour has not yet come.” However, on the night before His death, He declared, “Father, the hour has come” (John 17:1). He was in the prime of His earthly life, 33 years of age. His public ministry was only three years old. From a natural point of view, it would appear that death at this point would be untimely and premature. This was not the case. He said, “And what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27). In terms of God’s plan, He fulfilled the full purpose for His coming. He secured our salvation. We believe

that for those of us who are in Christ, God also accomplishes His purpose in the life span allotted us.

Paul's death is not "evil," nor is the death of any true believer in Jesus Christ. When Paul says in verse 18 of the fourth chapter of II Timothy, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for His heavenly kingdom," he is not saying that God will save him from death, but it will not be "evil!" It may be painful, awesome, but not evil. The concept is this: "To those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shadow of the Almighty" it is said, "no evil shall befall you" (Psalm 91:1, 10a). Paul knew that the sovereign grace of God so worked in and over His people that He could affirm: "We know that in everything God works for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). "Everything" includes the death of His people.

Is this not true of the death of our Savior? Though evil men designed to kill Him and planned to do this, and though it was their hands that nailed Him to the cross, still it was "according to the foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). And the early Christians in Jerusalem affirmed that a Providence for good purpose presided over and overruled the evil intentions of the crucifiers, "to do whatever Thy (God's) hand and Thy plan has predestined to take place" (Acts 4:28). Though Christ's death seemed to be a victory for the enemy and altogether evil, this was not the case. God's plan was prevailing and the greatest good the world knows came from this death, or salvation.

The death of Paul was not "fatal," nor is the death of any true believer. Death is never "the end." Rather, death punctuates the life of a believer with nothing more than a comma.

The sentence of life goes right on through that comma into greater glory. Paul spoke of his death as a “departure.” He was leaving here and going somewhere – to “His heavenly Kingdom.” Earlier Paul had written: “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. My desire is to depart and be with Christ which is far better” (Philippians 1:21,23). He said, “We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (II Corinthians 5:8). David spoke of going “*through* the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4), that is through death from here to heaven. Thus at death, the soul (self-conscious personality) of the believer, goes immediately to heaven, while the body is kept, united with Christ, in the grave until the further, final victory at Christ’s return.

Paul declares in I Corinthians 15 and I Thessalonians 4, that when Christ returns He brings with Him His own who have died. He raises their bodies in their glorious eternal form as habitations for the everlasting glory of eternity. At that time, when He comes, His people then living in this world will not suffer physical death, but their bodies will be transformed in an instant with resurrection qualities and at that moment of His advent all the elect of the ages will together be caught up to meet and be with Christ in the Kingdom of eternal Glory. Christ returns with His heavenly people! The resurrection takes place! The final, never-ending reunion of God’s total family occurs! His reign with us is without end, without sin, without death or sorrow! What a future!

Those who belong to Christ, therefore, may confidently face and answer two significant questions:

QUESTION 37,
(Shorter Catechism):

**“What do believers receive
from Christ at death?”**

Answer: “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and so immediately pass into glory; and their bodies being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection.”

QUESTION 1,
(Heidelberg Catechism):

**“What is your only comfort
in life and in death?”**

Answer: “That I belong body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who at the cost of His own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, everything must fit His purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.”

*“Thanks be to God, Who in Christ,
always leads us in triumph, and through
us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge
of Him everywhere”*

— (II Corinthians 2:14).



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