

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	26		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 3:21-26; 2 Timothy 1:3-10		
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THE ETERNAL GOSPEL

In Hamlet's famous soliloquy – you know, the one that begins with that well-known phrase, “To be, or not to be: that is the question” – Shakespeare captures humanity's innate fear of death: “To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveler returns, puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.”¹ We all are by nature afraid of death. We may pretend otherwise, but deep down there is a very real fear of death. Why is this so? In 1 Cor. 15:56, Paul tells us plainly that *the sting of death is sin* – it is sin that brings death and it is sin that causes us to greatly fear death. This is Hamlet's fear: “something *after* death.” Try as we might to dismiss this fear, to comfort ourselves with the insane belief that there is no God, or the naïve belief that He is so genial there is no need to worry about sin and judgment – the haunting fear persists. Heb. 9:7 plainly tells us that after death comes judgment. “But there is sin, and man has a feeling within him that death is not the end, and that he goes on to meet God in judgment. He knows he is guilty, so he is afraid. Even though he has not much knowledge of theology, instinctively he is afraid.”² Furthermore, as F. M. Young cogently points out, “If we are realistic, we soon become conscious of human helplessness to create utopia; we are conscious, individually as well as by being members of society, of human failure to live up to ideals of love and justice to which the value systems of our culture subscribe. In this context, the sacrifice of Christ is relevant, because it faces up to and accepts the situation. It shames us into climbing down from our pillars of pride and self-sufficiency, into recognizing our inadequacy and the depths of our sin and guilt, into seeing our need for repentance; and having shamed us, it deals with the problem by offering unconditional forgiveness, by wiping away the guilt and alienation, by mending the estrangement. It can do this because in this sacrifice the tragic situation was unreservedly accepted and its terrible consequences drained to the dregs. The situation was not avoided or suppressed. The cup was not refused or passed on. Because Christ accepted it, we can know ourselves accepted in spite of consciousness of guilt, in spite of being unacceptable.”³ Our familiarity with the fact that Jesus died, indeed the fact that His death is central to the Christian faith, is liable to obscure the astounding character of this event. Death is the wages of sin, and it does not cease to be such in the case of Christ. If it is the wages of sin, how could death be applicable to Him, how could it be predictable of Him? He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. He was the only person born of a woman who was without sin and, although there were two humans not made of women who were without sin, they did not continue without sin. He alone of all humans was without sin and continued so to be. He could protest: “Who is he that convicteth me of sin?” and say: “The prince of this world cometh, but he hath nothing in me.” So in the death of Christ we encounter an absolute abnormality. In all other cases, men and women deserve to die. He did not deserve to die. Yet He died. What is the reason?⁴ 2 Timothy is the Apostle Paul's last letter. It may well have been written days of, perhaps even hours of, His execution. What was he thinking? His

life's work seemed very much in jeopardy. Some of his closest friends had forsaken him (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:9-11). What will Paul say to young Timothy as he faces his own impending death?

I. THE ADMONITION (1:8)

Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me, His prisoner. That is, as Warfield has noted, an echo of the language that Paul had employed in Romans 1:16.⁵

A. **The Term.** The word translated *ashamed* is *epaischynomai* (it is the aorist passive subjective. When this is used with a negative, it forms a prohibition which is designed to prevent an action from beginning.)⁶ The root meaning of this word originally referred to that which is ugly and disfigured. It came to be associated with fear of ridicule of embarrassment. It is closely associated with disgrace (cf. Acts 5:41). Jesus recognized the possibility that some would be ashamed of Him (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26).

II. THE ENCOURAGEMENT (1:5-7)

The Apostle reminds Timothy of three specific things: (1) his hereditary faith, passed on to Timothy from his grandmother and mother; (2) his call to the ministry and the endowment of grace that he had received from Paul; and (3) finally and chiefly the power of the Gospel which he had experienced and was commissioned to preach.

III. THE EXHORTATION

Paul invites Timothy to join him in enduring hardship for the cause of the Gospel. Note how the Apostle seeks to encourage Timothy by directing his attention to three specific things.

A. **The Grace of God.** Look away from the trials and the difficult circumstances of life. You are in the hands of God Almighty, and this relationship was not in the smallest degree dependent on something Timothy had done, is doing, or can do. In other words, Timothy's strength (and particularly his weakness) is not the issue. Rather, it is God's own *purpose* and *grace*. God's purpose will not be thwarted, and His grace will not be ineffectual. Note how God's grace is described. It was *given* (not merely promised) finally and unequivocally *before the beginning of time*. This expression reaches back into eternity before time itself had any meaning.

B. **Its Manifestation.** Timothy is to fix his attention on Christ, the eternal Son of God. Paul is clearly teaching that the events of time, as worked out in human history, are (in a sense) but the shadows of eternal realities. As Warfield has poignantly pointed out, "the salvation wrought out on Calvary was but a corollary (so to speak) of the determining transaction in heaven: the Apostle leads his pupil to attach less importance to the course of affairs on earth in comparison with the eternal things thus vividly pictured before his eyes."⁷

C. **Its Victory.** Paul bids young Timothy to look *back* into eternity past to see salvation's inception. But there is more. Our salvation in all its richness was accomplished by Christ Jesus who entered human history and by His death abolished death and brought to light life and immortality.⁸

1. **The death of death.** This addresses far more than what we usually think of when we hear the word "death." We often restrict the word to the death of the body and the separation of the soul from the body. But it is far more than that. Death, in the biblical sense, signifies that awful punishment of sin, which is best understood as the exact opposite of *eternal life*. "We are too ready to overlook the stupendous character of death as undertaken and undergone by our Lord. Death is abnormal, the wages of sin, and the contradiction of what Jesus was as holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. In and of

itself, death cannot be contemplated except with horror, dread, and recoil. It is God's judgment upon sin, the expression of His holy wrath and vengeance. When thus considered, death takes on in Jesus' case unique and incomparable meaning. It is bereft of nothing that belongs to it as God's judgment upon sin. But in our Lord's case, it was not an event that overtook Him. Strictly speaking, it was not an infliction. It was an undertaking, a commitment assumed, an act to be effected by Himself, the exodus that He was to *accomplish* at Jerusalem (cf. Luke 9:31). In the event He poured out His soul unto death, He laid down His own life, He dismissed His spirit, He rent asunder the bond uniting the constituents of His human nature. He wrought what was in reality the contradiction of what He was as spotlessly human."⁹ Christ has *destroyed* (NIV) death. The NASB has *abolished*. The verb *katargeo*, which, though often translated in our English versions as "destroy," really falls short of that. It means rather "to make ineffective or inactive," and is used of unproductive land and unfruitful trees. They are still there. They have not been destroyed. But they are barren. When this verb is applied to that devil, to our fallen nature and to death, Heb. 2:14 (the devil); Rom. 6:6 (the "flesh" or fallen nature); 2 Tim. 1:10 (death), therefore, we know that they have not been completely "destroyed." For the devil is still very active, our fallen nature continues to assert itself, and death will go on claiming us until Christ comes. It is not, then that they have ceased to exist, but that their power has been broken. They have not been abolished, but they have been broken. They have not been abolished, but they have been overthrown.¹⁰

CONCLUSION: The great Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) captured the essence of sinful humanity's condition in a narrative where he imagines a man trying to run away from his own shadow; and ever and again he turns round, and it is still there, that black thing, dogging him; on and on, flinging himself wildly away from it – and round again, and it is still there; and he is panting now, and tired: "God, God, I can't get away from it! I can't!" Carlyle has depicted the awful reality of our sin, always with us and always, always reminding us of the horror that Hamlet dreaded – "something after death." Christ has conquered death because He has conquered sin. Here is where Romans 8:1 brings so much comfort and assurance – but *not* as it is interpreted in the framework of the new proposals on justification – for in their theological scheme we are forced to read Paul's remarks in this kind of paraphrase: "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, as long as they maintain covenant faithfulness and so increase their justification, which may be lost between now and the Day of Judgment, if they do not advance in their non-meritorious good works, they will be found not to have been in possession of the grace of perseverance and will suffer condemnation."¹¹ This is *not* how the Reformers and the great creeds of the Reformation understood the Apostle Paul, more importantly this is not what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he penned these words.

ENDNOTES

¹Hamlet, Act III, Scene I in *The Works of William Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 688.

²D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *I Am Not Ashamed: Advice to Timothy* (Baker, 1986), p. 104.

³F. M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (SPCK, 1975), p. 125.

⁴*Collected Writings of John Murray I* (Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 36.

⁵B. B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 405. Warfield goes on to point out that when closely scrutinized, the two texts speak to two very different things. "In Romans we have an objective statement; in Second Timothy an intensely subjective one. In the one case, the contrast is with the scorn of the world. Paul will not be deterred by that; he cannot be ashamed to preach a Gospel in which is enshrined the power of God to save. In the other case, the contrast is with the persecution of the world. Timothy is not to shrink back before the dangers that now hang over the proclamation of the Gospel."

⁶J. H. Moulton, *Grammar of New Testament Greek: Prolegomena* (T&T Clark, 1967), pp. 124-125.

⁷Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

⁸It is somewhat surprising that the ESV and the NIV follow the KJV in rendering *aphtharsa* “immortality.” The word literally means “no corruption.” It is used of God in Rom. 1:23 and of the resurrection of the body of Christians in 1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 52-54. The word that actually captures the sense of our English word “immortality” is *athanasia*, which means “no death” or “incapable of death.” While *athanasia* reveals that the resurrected saints will never experience death, but exist for all eternity, *aphtharsia* reveals that this will not be a mere eternal existence but the fullest life of joy and satisfaction possible, because the resurrected saints cannot experience any degeneration in the functions of body or mind. No corruption will disrupt the bliss of the eternal state. Cf. the extended discussion in Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Bethany House, 1984), p. 95.

⁹Murray II, p. 154.

¹⁰J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p. 240.

¹¹This is how D. Garlington reads the passage. Cf. his *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance: Aspects of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Mohr, 1994), p. 163. This work was based on Garlington's Ph.D. dissertation that he wrote at the University of Durham of noted New Perspective advocate J. D. G. Dunn.