

The thrill of victory

Colossians 2:11-15

December 14, 2008

So, how are you doing?

Are you winning or losing? Are you keeping your head above water or are you drowning in a sea of troubles? Are you going somewhere, moving forward, making a difference, or are you losing ground or marking time or spitting in the wind?

Do you have a grip on life or does life have its grip on you? Are you being who you want to be, doing what you want to do, unfazed by all the forces in this world that threaten to pull you down or pull you apart? Or are you fighting with everything you have just to hold yourself together?

And what are you fighting against? Who are your enemies? What are the forces pressing on you?

Old age? A rebellious son? Cancer? Apathy?

Worry? Stress? Prejudice? Low self-esteem?

Naysayers? Complainers? Mean people? People who don't care? A system that doesn't care?

A tanking economy? Rogue nations? Terrorists?

Being misunderstood? Being treated unfairly? Being treated unjustly? Being ignored?

Are these some of things with which you struggle? You do struggle, don't you? You are fighting, aren't you? Or is there someone here who has no struggles? Is there someone here who has no battles to fight? Is there someone here who has no enemies, no worries, nothing that threatens you or disturbs you or dismays you? If there is, please come forward and take this chair! We want to talk with you!

You do struggle, don't you? You do have to fight, don't you? But against what? Is it your son or your boss or your neighbor or a virus or the economy or the government or any government that is your enemy? Or is your enemy something bigger, something deeper, something with a much broader reach and a much longer lifespan, something more pervasive, something more pernicious?

Ephesians 6:12: We are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age ...

We are fighting against cosmic powers, something indeed bigger and deeper, a most daunting and mysterious and formidable foe! We are fighting not against an enemy, but against enmity; not just against an oppressor, but against oppression; against cruelty and apathy and selfishness and greed and pride and envy and fear!

Oh my! Do you see? Do you see that we are fighting too against ... ourselves? Because we are filled with selfishness and pride and envy and fear! The enemy is not just over there or out there, but in us and among us and all through us!

We are fighting against the two great enemies of all humanity, the two great enemies of all life: death and sin.

Death is the potent force that fills all of creation with its power to take life away, all at once or piece by piece. It takes many forms and uses many tools: war and disease, poverty and addiction.

Sin is the potent force that fills all of us with its power to disrupt and deceive and misdirect and divide, and it too takes many forms and uses many tools.

This is what we are fighting against -- sin and death! So how are you doing? Are you winning or losing?

Friends, I have something to say. As a minister of the gospel, I have something I must say: the battle is over, and our side won.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death ...

Conquering sin and death! Our two great enemies have been defeated! On the cross, Christ triumphed over his enemies, over our enemies, over the spiritual rulers and authorities, and made a public spectacle of them, leading them as captives in his victory procession! This means good news for poor people, healing for broken-hearted people, freedom for captives, because it is the power of poverty itself that is broken, captivity itself is made captive, the power of death itself is vanquished. It is done! It is finished!

So, is it time to celebrate? Yes! Absolutely yes! That is just what we come here to do. Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, we come together to celebrate the thrill of victory! We do still struggle. We are still involved in the fight. We are not yet sitting in that chair! But in the face of sin and death, in the face of such formidable foes, we come here to remind ourselves that their power is broken. The battle is won. Sin and death have been conquered, and their days are numbered.

So what does that mean? Where does that leave us ... now?

It leaves us with joy: *joy and gladness instead of grief.*

Faith is a means of seeing things through a different lens, of seeing things as they really are. In the face of death, in all its forms, we do not cringe with terror or become immobilized by grief, because we know its power to hurt is broken. What death threatens to take from us -- life -- has already been given to us in a form that cannot be taken away ... ever. Jesus, our risen Savior and our ever-present help, is the proof. And in the face of our struggles with sin, in all its forms, we live with confidence and expectation, without fear or shame, because we know its power over us is broken, its hold over us nailed to the cross. Faith sees the bigger picture. Faith remembers the victory has already been won.

Self-pity and depression and self-hatred and paralyzing grief all see things through a faulty lens. Their way of seeing things gives both us and our enemies much more credit than we deserve! You may think the world rises and falls with what you do. It doesn't! You may think your lot is held in the hands of those who make life miserable for you. It isn't! The world rises and falls at God's command and your lot is held in the hands of the one who sent Jesus to save you!

If you think you are already lost, or that your life or your well-being or your salvation is in serious jeopardy, you are deceived! The battle is already over! And our side won!

That is reason to celebrate. And that is reason to live with undiminished joy, a joy based not on the ups or downs of every circumstance, not on the success or failure of our own efforts, but on our confidence and trust in the One who has already conquered the only real enemies we have.

It leaves us with joy and it leaves us free: *freed from the power of this sinful self.*

You are free. You have a choice. You do not have to bow down and worship the gods of this world. You do not have to serve its ways and follow its rules and suffer its consequences. You do not have to do what you seem fated to do, or be what you were born to be. You do not have to be controlled by the demons of your genetics or your childhood or your lot in life or your wayward desires.

You are free. You have a choice. You can choose another way. You can choose Jesus' way. You can choose the path of obedience. You can choose the path to life. You have no destiny other than the destiny Christ has won for you, the destiny to move out of death and into life through union with him.

You are free to break out of the cycles of mistrust and suspicion and revenge and retribution that trap people and nations in lives that are going nowhere. You can forgive, you can reach out, you can love, you can make yourself vulnerable, you can give yourself way, you can make sacrifices -- without fear -- because there is no risk. You have nothing to lose! Who or what can take from you the things Christ has given you?

It leaves us with joy. It leaves us free. And it leaves us motivated: *the time has come!*

The time has come to announce Christ's victory! The time has come to push back against the power of sin and death in our lives and in the world. Now you might think that if the battle is already won, then there's nothing for us to do. On the contrary! Because the battle is won, we have much to do and every reason to do it. We have good news to bring to people who still think they're losing. And we are called and empowered to press the fight against the remaining vestiges of sin and death in all their forms.

We have good news to bring. That's witness. That's evangelism. That's just telling the truth!

To people who feel discouraged or hopeless or helpless or resigned, to people who have given up or stopped caring, to people who feel overwhelmed or defeated or beaten down, we have something to say: *In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death ...*

At one time we were dead, but now God has brought us to life with Christ. Our sins are forgiven and our debts are cancelled, nailed to the cross with Jesus!

We have good news to bring, and a mission to perform. Because the power of sin and death are broken, we can work with confidence and hope against hunger and poverty and disease and war. There is no reason to give up, no reason to let the forces of injustice and unfairness and inequity have their way in this world, because their power is broken, their time is up. The time has come to make things new!

So, how are you doing?

Has the gospel lifted your spirits? Will the truth set you free?

Are you ready to celebrate the good news? Are you ready to live it?

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death ...

Alleluia!