

Death is Swallowed Up

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[0 : 00] I'd like to join James in welcoming you to St. John's today. And before I reflect on those words that we heard in the cantata and in the Bible, just a warm welcome to those who are new today in that after the service, there is a, in the narthex, or I should say in the foyer outside, when you go out the doors, there's a yellow bag, and next to it there is a little pamphlet that says, hay at the top of it, and that's a card that if you want to fill out, we can connect with you and get to know you a little bit better and answer questions that you might have as well.

And I just want to draw your attention to the white sheet that's in your bulletin as well. Those are things happening in the life of the church. One of the things happening today is that you're all invited to a luncheon just following the service, and at the lunch there will be a speaker who will be Jeremy Curry.

He and his wife are going to be going to Nepal for the rest of their lives, basically, to be missionaries. And Jeremy came out of our congregation. We'll be praying for him through the years, and it'll be great if he can come and hear more about his ministry.

Also, and finally, two weeks from today, there'll be a luncheon where St. Peter's Fireside will give its vision, and that church is a church plant that St. John's is supporting and part of as well, and I commend that lunch for you as well.

And then finally, I want to give a heartfelt thanks on the part of the congregation for that beautiful cantata. Thank you, musicians and singers. That was marvelous.

[1 : 33] And I also want to thank Terry for his leadership.

I know that all of these people, this was a big ask, two weeks from the Easter services and lots of extra work for them. But you may know, and Terry, I think, knows this too, that Bach wrote about four years' worth of these cantatas and at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

He actually scheduled and performed cantatas every single week of the year, including holiday during the weeks as well. And so, Terry, is there any reason why we can't have one next week? This cantata that we just heard is one of the earliest ones that Bach wrote, and it was his audition to the church in Muhlenberg, Germany.

And he performed it on Easter 1707. And needless to say, he got the job. Not only did he get a salary, but he got some extra perks thrown in.

[2 : 44] I guess they were incentives of some sort. But he got the promise of 54 bushels of grain and two cords of wood and 360 kindlings delivered to his door every year.

So I don't know what we're giving Terry, what he gets delivered to his door. But I hope your wood supply is okay, Terry. Actually, Terry told me that his dad was a minister, and growing up they would get, for payment, they would get grouse and ducks and vegetables from people's gardens as well.

So it's nothing new, I guess. Well, the words that Bach used in this cantata are really marvelous. And they actually come from a hymn that Martin Luther wrote 180 years before.

And a couple of weeks ago, Sir John Elliot Gardner, who is a well-known conductor, he's from England, he has recorded many of Bach's cantatas.

And he wrote an opinion piece in the Guardian newspaper. And he wrote about Bach. And in it, he talks about Luther. And I want you to hear what he said, because I think it's really helpful for us today.

[3 : 59] He said, And he continues to write, For Luther, the Bible was not merely a text, a book to be read silently, but a living sound, or more precisely, voice, to be heard and listened to, and a ringing endorsement of music's role to express the word of God.

J.S. Bach, he writes, who devoted most of his working life to setting music to biblical texts, forged a unique synthesis between his music and the word of God.

And that's what you are hearing today. You are hearing God's word beautifully expressed in that cantata. And those words are based on the three Bible readings for that Easter day, 1707.

And we've read two of those Bible readings today. They are powerful words. And they are words that Bach believed with all his heart.

I don't know if you know this, but Bach had a very extensive theological education. He knew his Bible very well. And during the time that he was music director at his churches, he also taught catechism class as well, because he didn't have much else to do, apparently.

[5 : 28] But the pages of his Bible are filled with notes of his thoughts about what God was saying to him through that word, and his thoughts about what those words meant to the human condition.

And he believed with Luther that the Bible is the voice to be heard and to be listened to, and that in it God is addressing us, he's addressing the world with his promises.

So I want to take a few minutes and look at a Bible reading that we heard that's really at the center and it's the crux of this cantata that we heard.

And it would be helpful for you to look at page 962 in the Bible ahead of you, and that's the primary text for this cantata, one of the primary texts.

And so as you're turning there, I also want you to look at another text, and that's our bulletin. So if you look at page 3, we'll look at 4 as well, we are seeing God's promises in it.

[6 : 35] And look particularly at the duet on page 3. And in that we hear and we see there that grim death has spared no mortal person anywhere.

Well, this is a cheery thought, isn't it? It has spared no mortal man. And certainly this is an unchangeable fact of our life. We will die.

Our bodies are all moving towards a day when it will completely let us down. And there's strong empirical evidence for this, especially as we get older.

I used to, I have evidence in my own life. I used to have very good vision, and now I find with smaller print, my arms are getting longer and longer and longer as I hold the page out so I can read it.

I also find that my hair is turning color, and I don't even have to dye it. My wife very kindly says, I'm beginning to look more distinguished. And I like to believe that.

[7 : 40] I remember talking to a friend of mine at my last, at the church that I started out in, actually. He was in his 90s. He was a pioneer mountaineer. He was a fine educator.

He had a very exciting, amazing life. He was 92. And I asked him how he was doing and so forth.

He said, well, you know, my inside, I feel like I'm 18, he said, but my body is not cooperating.

And certainly that is what the human condition is. But I think that we feel death most painfully, not as our bodies might be slowly letting us down, but when people we love and we care for die, we feel in our hearts the separation of death, and it's not the way it should be.

It doesn't matter how long and good the life of our loved one has been or how peacefully they die. We grieve when we lose them.

Part of us is lost. And we want more than anything else to see them with us, healthy and living, physically with us.

[8 : 49] And we have this sense in our hearts that death is wrong. It was not the way it should be. And that's actually the right way to think about death, to feel about it.

Because something indeed has gone wrong. This was not the way creation was meant to be. And that duet that you're looking at says this. It says something curious. It says that death has come because of our sin and that nobody is without it.

And what that means is that death is not original to creation. It has been introduced, introduced into the world by sin. And it happened when people began to reject God, who is the source of life and love and who sustains his creation.

And all of us have been infected by that rivalry against God. And so that last line of the duet says that the result is that death has taken possession of humanity.

And it says that we live in a certain terror of death that's common to all humans. And I think that's true. There's a fear or a dread when we contemplate being separated from loved ones.

[10 : 00] And we contemplate being separated from the land of the living. So in the face of that grim reality, it is important for us to hear what is good and what is news that we need to hear.

God's voice on page 962 of the Bible is powerful. It is beautiful and loving all at the same time. And it comes against the face of death.

He says in that passage, God's voice says that he has overcome death for us. In his love, he has provided a way for us to be physically present with him forever.

And so I want you to look at these verses. Verse 50. It says, I tell you this, brothers and sisters, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. It can't inherit the kingdom of God.

In other words, no matter how we try as humanity, no matter how good our technology, how incredible the medical advances might be, no matter how hard we try in any of the wonderful things that humanity can do, death is going to have the final word.

[11 : 15] We can't extend our lives beyond the grave. There is no earthly way that we might find a way to God and to physically be with him forever.

Death is part of our DNA. And it is because of our helplessness before death, because we all have an expiry date, that there is a strong pull in our culture to deny death, to pretend that it's not really there.

And so that takes the form, well, it takes a variety of forms, but it takes the form of trying to stay young as long as possible, to forego the inevitable as long as we possibly can.

We also shield ourselves from those who are dying. It is often difficult for people to be in a place where there is death and dying. And we also, and I think this is common in Vancouver, we desperately try to live life so that we can experience all the pleasures that the world can give to us. We don't want to miss out anything that this world has to offer, because that is all there is. There is nothing more. But verse 51, God's voice joyfully shouts to us, behold, he says.

[12 : 36] In other words, pay attention. Look, there is something incredibly important here. I tell you a mystery, which is an open secret that we could not have come up with on our own. We shall not all sleep.

And the Bible uses that word for sleep, for death. Jesus said to the girl who had died, a little girl, she said, he said, awake, she is just sleeping.

And he raised her from death. And you see, in God's power, he makes death into something that is temporary. He makes it into something that goes right into wakefulness with him.

And so in verse 52, it says, we shall all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed, he says again, for this perishable body must put on the imperishable.

And you see what God's voice is saying here. There is a last day of human history and it will be announced by a trumpet blast. Now that probably isn't a literal trumpet blast.

[13 : 49] It's not loud enough for the whole world to hear. That's a symbol of an unmistakable sound, an unmistakable sign that everyone will see that God is working.

A trumpet was always used to signal the army to move. It was a sign that the king or somebody great was coming. And this is, a trumpet is used to say, you will hear it.

David Short can attest to this. I saw him at the Easter service with the brass behind him with a pained expression as the full blast of the brass came towards him close by.

And you see, we will know it. It will be a decisive act where all that is old will end. And all that is new will begin.

So that all those who have died, even for thousands of years, and those who are alive at the time, will be changed in an instant, faster than a wink of an eye, the Bible says here.

[14 : 52] That's God's power. Amazing power. And it's not the resuscitation of the body that God is promising. It's a glorious transformation of this body that we have now so that it becomes deathless, sinless, able to live in God's glorious presence.

Now, this is something that is beyond our mind. I think it sort of blows our mind that the boxes we have, it's hard for us to conceive of.

C.S. Lewis, one of the great Christian writers of the 20th century, wrote that if you saw a person in that changed state today, you would be very tempted to worship her or worship him.

That's how incredible the sight of that changed body will be. And he's right. Our bodies were designed even now for God's presence.

And our bodies have this unique ability to speak with words. It has the ability to understand, the ability to love. That is really unique. It's an amazing gift. But this is not just so we can relate to our fellow human beings.

[16:05] God gave that gift, our creator, so that we might have a living and eternal relationship with the eternal God who speaks to us, who understands us, and who loves us.

And so, what must happen then is that body that he has given to us must be transformed into something that can go for eternity.

And we can't imagine that very well. We have to imagine being able to relate to God and other people in ways that can forever explore the depths of God's love, infinite love.

It's a body that we'll be able to love perfectly in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions with no sin ever to mar relationships, with no possibility of evil, death, or suffering that might separate us.

Imagine being able to see God in all of his glory and majesty and finding that your deepest desire, your deepest hopes, are fulfilled just in seeing him, in being with him, and loving him.

[17:15] Only a changed, glorious body that God alone can give will do this. And as Lewis said, it will be awesome to behold. Now, there is something for us that we have to deal with when we hear about this, when we think about it, because a changed body is meant for one thing, and that is that we will be with God eternally.

And therefore, God does not force that on us. In his mercy, he allows a choice. And I believe this choice is a decision, that is the most important decision any human being will make, because we can reject or ignore that gift of God, the gift of a changed body.

We can do that. That's one way to live. Or we can believe his voice, and we can embrace that gift that he offers. And I know that as we're sitting here today, there is a diversity of people listening.

Many of you believe in God. Some of you do not believe in God. Some of you are searching for God as well. But this gift that God is offering in this cantata and in this Bible reading is deeply relevant to all of us, no matter what we're thinking spiritually.

Because the fundamental problem that all of us face as humans is death. We share that problem together, and it is fundamental. But Christianity is unique in the world because it comes to terms with death.

[18:50] It actually meets that need, the deepest need that we have. And in fact, what this reading says is that he conquers death. That's how our passage ends today.

Look at verse 54. God's voice is speaking to us in really a majestic way. He says this, Then shall come on the day, you know, the day that God comes to give a new body and a new creation.

On that day shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

You see, it's unmistakable, repeated over and over again. Death has been vanquished in Jesus.

And this is where the chorus that we heard, if you look on page four, that chorus says that the war, it talks about a war of majesty.

And in fact, that struggle is played out in the music that we heard. Throughout the cantata, and by the way, I found in preparing for this that there are just as many commentators of music, maybe not quite so many, but lots of commentators on music, just like there are commentators in the Bible.

[20:08] And I found it very interesting. One of the people who wrote about this cantata said that in the cantata, there is a harmonic struggle that continues between major and minor.

And not until the last, the very last cadence, do we finally arrive at D major. And that key symbolizes the final victory.

You know, Bach is through that music communicating that victory, which is this hope that we leave the cantata with. And it's why every stanza ends with hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, you know, seven times.

But the question for us today is, how do we know that is true? How do we know that death is defeated? Well, look at verse 56 and 57.

It says there that the sting of death is sin, the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, he is the key.

[21:13] He is why we know. Jesus is the victor. He is the guarantee that one day death will come to an end. And it says the sting, which is the word for a scorpion sting, that sting of death is sin.

That is what hurts us. That's what poisons us. That's what destroys peace with God and blocks us from the life with him. That's what corrupts creation. But it says here that Jesus draws that lethal stinger out and he takes it into himself on the cross and he gives us peace with God.

Not only that, it says something curious. It says that God's law is the power of sin. And that's because God's law shows us how far we are, all of us, no matter who we are, how far we are from God's standard.

And in fact, it actually excites us to sin more because here is somebody telling us what we should do, how we should live, somebody greater than us.

And we rebel against that in our natural state. But Jesus, again, fulfills all of the law in our place and he takes away our guilt and makes us free to follow him.

[22 : 28] And that is a gift. That is a gift of victory for us. And then the question comes up, well, how do we know? It's because of Jesus.

But how did Jesus do that? And I want to close this reflection by bringing you up to the very top of that chapter. So turn the page back to 961.

And here is how Jesus gave that victory, took the sting, lived the life of law in our place. There's four things very briefly.

It starts with that. Look at verse 3. Notice in verse 3, I'm passing on something of great importance, the writer says here, Paul. And he says, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture.

You see, that's where the majesty, the work, the war, that struggle of majesty, and the German for majesty is actually a sense of awesome, this awesome, astounding war took place.

[23 : 31] Jesus, on that cross, took our sins upon himself and died in our place. So it wasn't nails that held him there. It was his love for you and me. And then secondly, that he was buried.

He truly died, that's saying. There is death that is beyond a shadow of a doubt. And then thirdly, that he was raised on the third day.

And this is the proof of Jesus' victory over death. He passed through death. Death could not contain him because he is God, the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

This is how the victory takes place. And then finally, in the fourth way, that he was seen by Peter, Cephas, and then to the twelve disciples, and then to five hundred.

This is so important for us because Jesus' resurrected body was seen by many people that were living at that time, as it goes on in that verse. they saw and touched and heard this risen Jesus, bodily resurrected.

[24 : 36] And they were looking at a foretaste, a preview of the changed body that God promised in our passage today. And so this is how God did it.

This is the good news that Christians talk about. And I want to close by saying that God's voice is telling us this morning that Jesus' death and resurrection is for us, for you and me.

Jesus alone forgives your sin and my sin. Jesus alone rose from the dead. Jesus alone can one day transform your body and your soul to live with him forever.

So you see, Jesus alone can be the victor over death. And that's why Jesus spoke very clearly to a crowd about this in John 640.

And I hope you remember this as we leave this passage today. He said this to the crowd. He said, For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

[25 : 47] Now again, there is a great decision that Jesus gives you here. You can believe God for this or not. And certainly that day, we know that some grumbled about this.

What right does Jesus have to say these things, these incredible things? Why should we look to the Son? But God's voice says to you and me today, Will you instead look to Jesus, the Son of God, and believe in him today?

He is far more ready to give you eternal life now and to raise you up on the last day than you are to pray or than I am to pray.

It is a desire that is deeply within God. That's why he goes to such lengths to destroy death. And so I want to end by praying.

And you can just listen to this prayer and maybe join in what I'm saying with it. It may be something that you've thought about, but the way that we respond to God is simply by praying.

[26 : 51] And so please, please in a moment of quiet, just listen to God's voice and pray. Father, we thank you for Jesus.

We thank you that he is our Lord and our God. We thank you that he conquered death. We thank you that in your love you have provided a way for me, for us, to be physically present with you

forever.

You forgave my sins by dying for me on a cross. And I know that I am a sinner. I ask for your forgiveness. Thank you for rising from the dead.

I look to you now and believe that you will give me. You will raise me up on the last day and give me eternal life now. Please strengthen me to follow you always, all the way through death into the resurrected life, the changed body that you give to us.

In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.