

Breaking Death's Hold

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 2, we read in verses 14 and 15, For as much then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same, that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

We have then in these verses the fact that Christ, having become flesh and blood as the children, that is, as mankind were, those who in previous verses are described as being his brethren, verse 11, for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, for both he that sanctified and they were sanctified are all of one, and they were flesh and blood.

Therefore, he himself took on flesh and blood, that he might share in their limitations, in their weaknesses, and above all, that he might, through death, pay the price of sin for all who would trust and believe in him.

Flesh and blood, of course, as we know, once separated by sin from the Creator, could only ever have a limited shelf life.

Without the Lord, once we are in a state of sin, death is inevitable, unless the Lord comes back first. With sin, death enters in.

[1 : 3 4] Death is, as we know, separation from God. He warns man of this. We looked at Genesis this morning. We'll look again briefly at it again this evening.

Chapter 2, verses 16 and 17. The Lord commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it, for on the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

In other words, you will be separated from me, as proved to be the case. But, of course, the serpent took that and put a different spin on it. In chapter 3, verses 4 and 5, the serpent said to the woman, You shall not surely die, for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Now, of course, it is true that in the moment when mankind eats of the fruit, separation has entered in between him and God. The man and the woman, as soon as they ate, they knew that they were naked.

They hid themselves. They wanted to put distance between themselves and God. That is what instinctively happened to them. The separation entered into their very hearts, even before the Lord confronted them with it.

[2 : 5 3] And yet, as the serpent said, they did not drop dead that moment, but death entered in. Separation from God. Like a radiation sickness.

It might not kill you right away if you're exposed to, say, an atom bomb or a nuclear blast or whatever. It doesn't kill right away, perhaps. All at once. It can take years, decades, of the gradual breaking down of the body's defences and strength and systems and so on.

And little by little, the person just begins internally to die. Bit by bit, the body gives out. So Adam lived for 930 years.

We know that he did. The Bible tells us that he did. And yet, still we read in Genesis 5. Adam lived, yes, 130 years. And he begat a son in his own likeness after his own image.

All the days that Adam lived were 930 years and he died. And the son that he begat, Enos, likewise, verse 8, all the days of Seth, all the days of Seth were 912 years and he died.

[4 : 06] Again, likewise, at verse 11, his son, all the days of Enos were 905 years and he died. Verse 14, all the days of Canaan were 910 years and he died.

Verse 17, all the days of Mahalil were 895 years and he died. And so it goes on. All the days of Jared were 960 and 2 years and he died.

However long, however many centuries and decades people are granted, the sickness of being separated from God eats away at the body and at the soul and little by little it gives out.

Death is the wages of sin. That sin that our first parents committed is transmitted to each generation by ordinary generation and each one inherits the original sin of our parents except, of course, our Lord who was not conceived in the normal way but through the power of the Holy Ghost.

And so we have death entering in generation after generation after generation. Yes, of course, there are exceptions. Enoch who walked with God. Yes, there, verses 22 to 24 of Genesis 5.

[5 : 20] Enoch walked with God after he begat Methushah 300 years. He begat sons and daughters all the days of Enoch for 365 years. And Enoch walked with God and he was not.

Disappeared for God to come. He didn't die. There was an exception. There was an exception likewise with Elijah who was taken into heaven in a Friday chariot. He didn't see death in this world.

There are exceptions but they are exceptional. Death enters in upon the human race through sin. And this is the reality.

Eve and Methuselah there as we read on verse 27 of Genesis 5. 969 years longer than any man before or since.

And it's all been shorter since then. Much, much shorter. Nobody since then has ever lasted as long but the end result is always the same.

[6 : 18] And he died. So then because this was the weakness of humanity for as much then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood he also himself likewise took part of the same.

he made their weakness his weakness. And being found in fashion as a man as Philippians tells us he humbled himself and became obedient unto death even the death of the cross.

He entered into our weakness. He took part of the same and came and dwelt as a child and as a man with all the limitations and weaknesses of humanity.

He sat with us as to begin with of course Job's friends did for him. You know we read in Job's great misery these three friends you know Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite they made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him.

When they lifted up their eyes afar off and knew him not they lifted up their voice and wept and they rent everyone's mantle sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven so they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights and none spake a word unto him for they saw that his grief was very great.

[7 : 41] To begin with they did share with him his grief they sit there silently for seven days now with our Lord we could say that we have almost thirty silent years other than the incident in the temple when he is twelve we know nothing of the childhood and youth and the young manhood of Christ until he begins his public ministry with the baptism of John and the Jordan and so on for our Lord there are practically thirty silent years as he shared in the weaknesses and limitations of humanity why did he do that he did it through death to destroy him who had the power of death that's what we read verse 14 here this is his intention he comes to die he was born to die to endure death for sinners was the explicit reason why God became flesh this is what we read 2nd

Corinthians 5 verse 19 to wit that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself not imputing their trespasses unto them and have committed unto us the word of reconciliation possible only because he himself has paid the price that is why he has come but we might legitimately ask if we stop to think about it if death is separation from God and it's the wages of sin as Romans 6 tells us we're 22 how even if Jesus did become flesh how can he die because it's only sin that causes death and you just said a wee while ago that Jesus was conceived in a different way from the rest of us he was conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary so he gets his humanity from his mother he gets his Godhead from his father through the Holy Ghost so the sin of Adam is not transmitted down through

Joseph or through any other human being there so he doesn't inherit original sin he doesn't commit sin in his life he's not sinful in any way how can death take its cut on him how can he possibly endure death then no matter how many times they nail him to a cross or stick a javelin in his side or whip him half the death how can he die when there is no sin in him well the answer is of course that he became sin for us 2 Corinthians 5 21 he hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him this exchange takes place upon the cross for having prayed father forgive him for they know not what they do he takes the sin of all who would trust and believe in him he takes it upon himself he becomes their sin and as he becomes their sin all the wrath of

God which is directed against sin and we read about that this morning with Josiah reading in the law about all the power of God and the wrath of God that is against Israel and Jesus sins and he says it's actually true is this really going to happen to us and the prophetess says yes it is that's what the word says that's what the law of God says he's not going to change it he can't turn it aside he can't turn a blind eye with a nudge and a wink and say well it's okay for you Josiah because you're a good guy it doesn't matter God's law is not going to be changed God's wrath against sin is not going to be changed so what happens on the cross is that he takes upon himself the sins of all who will and have in the fullness of time trusted in him trusted in the Lord as they're saying here and he becomes their sin and all the wrath of God is directed against him and the ultimate separation the equivalent of eternal separation which is what hell is from the comfortable presence of the Lord that is what he endures he takes it upon himself and this was always the intention in Isaiah 53 way back in the Old

Testament long before Jesus came to this earth we read verse 4 surely he had borne our griefs and carried our sorrows yet we did esteem him stricken smitten of God and afflicted but he was wounded for our transgressions he was bruised for our iniquities the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed all we like sheep have gone astray we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all now I know we read these verses in Isaiah and other places they're so familiar to us in many ways but we don't often stop and think what does that actually mean it means that Christ is made sin he becomes that iniquity for us and all the wrath of God against iniquity does not divert it doesn't cease to hunt down the sin it's just that he becomes the new location it's an illustration of how to make it clear but if you think in terms of let's say that there's an animal or a fugitive being hunted people on horses or in cars or whatever chasing them across the countryside and all the bloodhounds have been given a scent of the person's clothes or whatever and so on and they're chasing them and supposing there's somebody that helps them and stops says right you're waiting across that stream change your clothes take these clothes

[13 : 47] I'll put your clothes on so that I'll smell of your smell and the blood and all the humanity that'll be on your clothes that's where the bloodhounds that's where the chasers will smell and I'll head over the hills that way you go that way and they'll follow me and sure enough the bloodhounds still pick up the scent and all the horses are still chasing after them but the person who's now been washed and changed they divert away they're chasing the scent they're chasing what they see as the identity of their prey it's just now it's a different person they're doing their job they're doing the right thing the wrath of God is still owning it like a smart missile upon the sin which has to be destroyed it is just that now it is being taken by a different source it is no longer us if we are trusting in Christ it is him for as much that as the children are partakers of flesh and blood he also himself likewise took part of the sin that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death that is the devil the devil does destroy the devil's power in so far as death had a finality that now it doesn't have it is shorn of its potency yes it still exists physically unless the Lord comes back first then all of us will physically die but that death is swallowed up as Paul writes the Corinthians swallowed up in victory by a far greater life this life which is ended by physical death is superseded by a far greater fuller eternal life we are going to go again to 2 Corinthians and we see it in chapter 4 verses 16 to 18 for which cause we think not but though our outward man perish so we may physically die yet the inward man is renewed day by day for our light affliction which is but for a moment in other words this world this life may go on for decades in terms of eternity it's just a blink of an eye this light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen well the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal things which are seen are temporal what we have in this life what we can touch and hagggle and taste and see it's for a time and for a time yes

God is at work in this world and the devil is at work in this world and as I mentioned in the past for the believer this world is as bad as it's ever going to get because the devil is here at work and all the evil and sin that we see in this world death is in this world all the effects are in this world but for the unbeliever this world is as good as it's ever going to get because God is at work in this world his saints his people his kindness his goodness is at work in the world there is an admixture of good and evil both contending with each other in this world once we go to eternity there is either undiluted darkness unbelief hatred suffering pain cruelty in a lost eternity or this undiluted glory grace goodness love well-being health blessing in a blessed eternity but here for now for these few decades we experience the two contending with each other and here we are slap bang in the middle and we know like Paul of old that within ourselves there is this conflict the flesh lusting against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh there is our desire to do what is right but sin is always present with us this conflict in which we have not the power to win because the devil knows that the clock is ticking and as long as the clock is ticking as long as we don't find the solution as long as we continue in ignorance and unbelief the time is ticking away and every breath that we draw and every heartbeat that we experience is one near the fulfilment of the number he's given to us the number of our days which is fixed which is finite the more we're using up of our time the more and more we pass up the opportunity to close in with

Christ and to be redeemed the less and less opportunity remains for us and the devil rubs his hands with me which is why he is not bothered he doesn't mind whether you follow a false religion be as religious as you like false religion he doesn't matter whether you're a godless atheist who denies that there's an afterlife or a god or anything like that he doesn't matter whether you follow a false prophet whether you're worldly whether you're secular he doesn't care he doesn't mind be all these things and he'll be perfectly happy the one thing he is afraid of is of a living soul finding the only way to actually be saved which is in Christ Jesus which is why the world he is so often described as the prince of this world why the world can tolerate each and every form of false religion saying yep equality gonna give them all equal space yep okay religion in its place in its box that's okay just like everything else but the gospel the true unadulterated gospel of

Jesus Christ that has to be sideline that has to be explained away as well that's just what a group of people choose to do or let's put a different form of christianity that's less blatant and less pure in its place and say yeah there's your christian element you know these people still go to church they have crosses and they have sort of they use the name of Jesus so we'll call that christian but it's not the pure gospel it's not the salvation that is in christ the lord where he once and for all pays the price of sin for all who will trust and believe in his name that the world cannot tolerate that the devil cannot tolerate the flesh cannot tolerate the clock is ticking and the devil knows it here and for a time both god and the evil one are contending with each other in the world out there and within our own heart and spirit that if we're in christ then the lord gradually more and more gains the upper hand the death of which the devil had the power is superseded overwhelmed exceeded by the life that christ now gets and it is reduced the devil's victory to an empty shell if you'll forgive me for an illustration from the world from the sporting world and as a wee point many years ago the football scene changed a bit up until the year 1975 the usual teams had been winning everything you know

Celtic nine years in a row and Rangers a couple of years running and they were the champions of the first division the Scottish first division in 1974 and again 1975 and then in 1976 the first division was won by Park Thistle and then in 77 it was won by St.

[21 : 30] Luron and then in 78 it was won by Morton and then in 79 it was won by Dundee and then in 80 it was won by Harts what had happened you know has everything completely changed have the old farms just completely disappeared you know or have they just completely lost the power to win the first division anymore and all what had happened as those of you of a certain age and above will know and remember is that at that time the first division ceased to be the first division and Scottish football authorities introduced what became as the premier division so that you can win the first division as many times as you like and it's not going to make you lead champions because they put another layer up above it they put another layer on top and that's the one that the old firm keep on winning and so on so you can have the first division part this was a mirror or morton whoever you like and it doesn't really matter because it doesn't mean you're the champions anymore once it may have done but it is now shorn of its actual power and glory because something else has now superseded it so likewise yes physical death will still be there even for the believer but now it is superseded by something more glorious more great more spectacular which the

Lord has laid up for them that fear them in the larger catechism there are a couple of questions which I think are quite well they're all quite telling but a couple in particular opposite to our text here first of all the larger catechism question 84 shall all men die the answer that is given is death being threatened as the wages of sin it is appointed unto all men once to die for that all have sinned okay fair enough larger catechism question 85 death being the wages of sin why are not the righteous delivered from death seeing all their sins are forgiven in Christ good question there answer the righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it so that although they die yet it is out of God's love to free them perfectly from sin and misery and to make them capable of further communion with Christ in glory which they then enter upon it is like what Paul writes to the

Philippines for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain I am in a strait between us too having a desire to depart of me with Christ which is far better so even that which was the devil's great power over us now becomes for the believer something to positively embrace all that it will do is it will break open the door into glory far more quickly and it will mean that we go from this mixture of good and evil in this world to the unalloyed joy and beauty and glory that the Lord has laid up for those that love him yes we pass through that gate that we call death but because of what Christ has done because of what he has done in sharing our weakness sitting where we sit as Job's friends did for a while taking flesh and blood upon himself for the express purpose of dying because he has died in our room and in our stead he has experienced in that death that which we could not possibly endure the separation of our soul from the love of God he endured that agony of hell itself my God my God why hast thou forsaken me he became sin for us if you're trusting if you're believing in

Christ as your saviour or if you're going to believe in Christ as your saviour then it means that all the sins you ever committed and repented on all the sins you shall commit it is all charged not to your account but to this to him who is able to pay the debt in full and then some to pay for every single soul to believe something it means that we are free it means that we don't have to fear the devil we don't have to fear death anymore for as much then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood he also himself likewise took part of the sin that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death that is the devil the devil still has that death in his hand it's still in his armory but it's rather like because it has been so superseded it's like you know there would have been a time when in the medieval ages the pope who was looked to by everyone in those days as being God's representative he condemned the invention and use of the crossbow because it was considered to give such an unfair and inhuman advantage to the person using it against the proposed victim it could shoot with such power and such accuracy over such a distance that was thought to be a fearful weapon which ought not to be given the blessing of God's supposed representative now you could be the one who has the stockpile of crossbows in all the world and the devil here is left like oh I've got death

I've got the great power of death yes you do you've got the stockpile of crossbows but God's weaponry has now so far exceeded anything that you've got you know in the meantime while you've been stockpiling your crossbows flintlocks and musketry and then rifles have been invented then machine guns and then nuclear weapons and all the vast arsenal of modern weaponry has far exceeded your pathetic little pile that you might have of crossbows and bolts there and the devil still has his dead oh look I've got the power of death but Christ's power of life is so much greater it makes the devil's power look pathetic pitiable by comparison deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage the fear of death makes us subject to bondage what do we mean by that well it doesn't just mean oh I'm afraid of the unknown it does mean however that all through the history of humanity it has been this recognition this understanding that there is some kind of afterlife though we cannot project into it we can't see into it we don't know what it contains but the recognition that this physical death cannot be the end there must be something more which is why mankind from the very beginning even if he has not known the true God even if he hasn't been of the covenant line and Noah and Abraham and all that they have invented gods to themselves they have invented ideas of the afterlife whether it's the ship of death sailing across the sea and paying the ferryman with the two coins and they go on the eyes and so on and the Celtic ideas of the afterlife or the sky that would fall in your head or the Egyptian ideas where you pack the tombs with all the things they're going to need in the afterlife this sense of there's got to be something more it is instinctively engraved on the heart of mankind from day one that this is not the only world that there is there is an afterlife there is death and we fear it and because we fear it we invent or try to imagine all these potential afterlife scenarios and even in this day and age as we've mentioned in previous weeks and has been drawn attention to by some commentators in public media when musicians or public celebrities die they'll say oh well they'll be up there in heaven now playing their records and DJs or tuning up their guitars or writing more songs and entertaining the angels all this nonsense where do they get this idea that heaven is somehow just a continuation of whatever we did down here are they going to say well oh sadden we say it'll be up there still gassing curds to his heart's content everyone will be up there still purifying the races and so on all this nonsense how do we imagine the afterlife is going to be the only evidence that we have is what

[30 : 44] God himself has revealed and yet man fears this last great unknown and it is because of what he fears that he invents all these possible scenarios one of which undoubtedly is just the complete denial saying well there isn't a God so there can't be a heaven there can't be a hell this world is all there is you live your life you live you die that's it won't stop the end isn't it sad isn't it tragic that this kind of emptiness is what is gaining currency in our schools in education in politics and yet we heard here just today that the arch denial of the existence of God Richard Dawkins has supposedly now fallen victim to a stroke now the church of England is apparently praying for him which is well and right and noble and good that they should do so we should all pray not only for his recovery from this stroke but pray for his recovery from this underneath grief because to have your capabilities thus reduced to be thus now reduced in your capacity to act perhaps to focus in thought to recognize such is the frailty of humanity death rushes that bit closer and the

God whom you've spent a career denying is coming ever closer to meet with you it must be a fearful scenario you can go into denial as much as you like you can stand on the deck of the Titanic and say no no this ship is unsignable just because the water happens to be getting up an awful lot closer and people are getting off into lifeboats and so on I don't believe it's going down you can say yes but look it is sinking ah yes but it's not gone down yet the ship is still above above the waterline it's lower than it was yes and it's tipping up at a fearful angle but yes it's still there the only way you will ever win such an argument is in retrospect the only way that you will ever convince the one who is an atheist to the end is once you're actually there in the Hriyaki rafter then we'll be separated by such a gulf as we shall never see or meet them again there will never be an opportunity to have that conversation in retrospect it is only in retrospect that you will see your oops yes look it was going down after all but I kind of did sink oops yes there was a

God there was an afterlife the Bible told you all about it Christians kept trying to tell you about it you just denied it you just refused it and why did you insist on shutting it out why did you say I'm not going to listen shut my eyes cover my ears if not the fear the fear of death deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage this great imprisonment of fearing the unknown and so devising anything we can imagine clutching at straws to say maybe it's this maybe it's that maybe if I make a big tomb fill it with all the things I used in this life it'll be of use in the afterlife after all what do we imagine it to be like we are told a little in scripture of what it is like above all we are told in scripture who will be there with us that we are trusting in him the lord himself is the glory of Emmanuel's land yes the glorious descriptions of the holy city they are something of what it is like but the holy city without the holy one in it will just be an empty caricature it's not a heaven at all if he is not there it's like if say the royal family were to were to build themselves a whole new palace on the streets of

London or something and so Buckingham Palace would have become devil at dead game without all the furniture all the royal carpets and all the paintings and all the wealth and all the spectacular furnishings and they say you can go and live in Buckingham Palace great fantastic and you say here's the keys and you walk in the empty doors the gates creep no soldiers standing guard the big court guards all empty you push open the door and you feel the draft blowing through the empty corners it's all dark it's all empty there's nobody there there's no furniture there's no carpets there's no paintings on the walls there's no lights you've got this great big empty shell and it's dark and it's empty that is what heaven would be like without the Lord in it it's just the shell the glory of heaven itself the promise for the believer is that they will be with their Lord for all eternity this is taking away the fear of death deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage now you may be subject to that bondage now tonight for all I know you may have something of that fear of death for all I know the only way to be free of it is to take unto yourself the only one who has conquered death to receive that which he freely offers and freely gives to break the power of death to break the power of the evil one who has the power of death to deliver the likes of you and me who through fear of death the last great unknown and through the fear of this we are all our lifetime subject to this bondage this fear this anxiety and through it all the Lord is saying don't be afraid trust in me

I have conquered death I am the resurrection and the life he that believeth in me though he were dead yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die yes like the catechism said yes the righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day even in death they are delivered from the sting and curse of it so that although they die yet it is out of God's love to free them perfectly from sin and misery and to make them capable of further communion with Christ in glory which they then enter upon this is his purpose this is why he has come you may spend a lifetime sitting in church singing his psalms reading his bible going through the motions of prayer but if you fail to close in with Christ during this brief so brief lifetime when evil and good are fighting together in this world when the Lord and the evil one are contending for your soul here in this world if you fail to close it with Christ all of those years will have been vain for the reason he came is to deliver the likes of you and me for as much that as the children are partakers of flesh and blood he also himself likewise took part of the same that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death that was the devil and deliver them who through fear death were all their lifetime subject to bondage you don't have to be in bondage anymore you don't have to fear it anymore if you want to fear anything fear the

[38 : 33] Lord the fear of the Lord is clean it endures forever and it gives life in all its fullness you don't have to fear anything but the Lord and the fear of the Lord is the love of the Lord and we are called upon only to love him who has first loved us that is why he came that is why he became flesh and blood that is why he lived that is why he died and that is why he would call us to life that shall never end let's pray he can help