

Hebrews 2:14-18

“Liberty or Death” (Part 1)

Well, Happy Independence Day to you all. 245 years ago today our founding fathers ratified the Declaration of Independence and with that the United States of America was born.

I'd like to read for you the words which our forefathers wrote as the closing to the Declaration of Independence:

For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

Now, those were not just empty promises. Of the 56 men who signed the declaration, one third of them would serve in the Continental Army or State militias. Five were captured by the British and imprisoned. Others had family members imprisoned. Francis Lewis' wife died of health issues incurred while she was held in captivity by the British. Two of the signers lost their sons in the Continental army. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned by British troops. And six of the signers died before the end of the war never knowing if the cause of independence they had sacrificed so much for would ever become a reality.

While liberty was declared in 1776, securing that freedom would take another seven years of warfare and claim the lives of 25,000 American colonists. While other wars the United States has been engaged in have resulting in a higher number of American losses, when you consider the number of those killed as a percentage of the population living here at the time, the losses of the American Revolution are second only to the Civil War where, of course, casualties on both sides are counted as American losses.

The cost of American independence was high. You and I live in freedom that we did nothing to earn or deserve. Freedom that was purchased for us by others long ago who paid dearly for our liberty even giving their very lives for the freedom you and I enjoy.

That is sacrifice worth remembering... worth celebrating... worth honoring.

But as tremendous of an event as the birth of our nation was, the freedom that has been granted us as Americans cannot begin to compare with the freedom we have been graced with in Jesus Christ. The cost of that liberty was paid for through the death of God's own son. And the freedom He won for us is an everlasting freedom that can never be taken away from us. Today, we're going to look into the revolutionary freedom that has been won for us by Christ.

Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 2. No book of Scripture celebrates the supremacy of Jesus Christ more than the book of Hebrews does. The entire epistle exalts our Lord and chapter 2 is certainly no exception.

Follow along as I read **Hebrews 2:14-18**.

¹⁴ Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He [that is Christ... He] Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. ¹⁶ For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

¹⁷ Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

Verse 14 begins with reference to “children” who share in flesh and blood. The verses immediately preceding make it clear that that term “children” refers to those whom Christ came to save. They are believers who have been redeemed by grace through faith and have become children of God. As **John 1:12-13** state...

¹² But as many as received [Christ], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

If you have been born again having put your faith in Christ alone for your salvation then you are included in that term “children”. And **verse 14** states that it is because God’s children are themselves flesh and blood that Christ also took on the same becoming like them.

Verse 17 conveys the same though, only with even more intensity. It says there...

“He had to be made like His brethren in all things.”

Christ’s incarnation was not an optional part of God’s plan. It was necessary for the fulfillment of His divine will that Christ would take on a human body.

But why? Why was it necessary for Jesus to partake of flesh and blood? Why did He need to take on a human nature in order to save us from our sins? And what benefits do we derive from the fact that Jesus became like us in all things?

Well, over the next two weeks we're going to unpack verses 14-18 and see **4 Reasons Why the Incarnation Was Necessary**. We'll cover two of those reasons today and two more next Sunday.

And in addition to those reasons, each week we will also look at the subsequent help this passage says we receive from Christ as a result of the incarnation. So, each week we'll cover two reasons for the incarnation and a resulting benefit to us.

Verse 14 provides us with the first reason that the incarnation was necessary. Let's look at that verse again.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that – here's the purpose statement – that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.

Why did Christ have to take on flesh and blood?

REASON #1: To Subdue the Devil (v.14)

Satan has never been able to inflict even the slightest harm on God Himself. And so, the worst he can do is to attack God's creation. And his target of choice is mankind, presumably because we were the ones made in God's image and entrusted with overseeing the earth and everything in it.

Now, it's interesting that Satan is referred to here as the one "who had the power of death" because it's clear from Scripture that God is the one who has numbered our days, not Satan. The devil has no authority of his own to take the life of anyone. If you remember the story of Job, Satan was only able to act against Job to the extent that God allowed him. And because God told Satan to spare Job's life Satan could not kill him.

So, that raises the question, in what way does the devil have "the power of death"? Well, to begin with, it was through Satan's temptation of Eve that death entered creation (Genesis 3). God had told Adam he was not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, "for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." But Satan tempted Eve, and she took and ate of the fruit and gave some to Adam who was with her, and he ate. And in that moment, Satan got the result he was after.

It may well have been that, in getting Adam and Eve to sin that Satan expected God to strike them dead immediately. And that would have been the end of the human race, snuffed out in the very first generation. What a coup that would have been for the devil!

Whether that was what Satan expected or not, we aren't told. Regardless, Satan knew that God required death as the penalty for sin. And if he could hold people in sin, death would be the result and God's plan for mankind would be ruined.

When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit they did indeed come under the curse of death. Immediately they died spiritually. Eventually they would die physically. And without a means of salvation, they would ultimately die eternally – what the Book of Revelation refers to as the “second death”, eternal destruction in hell.

Through his temptation of Eve, Satan successfully brought mankind under the curse of death. This is why Jesus said in **John 8:44** that “the devil [...] was a murderer from the beginning.” Because he was the catalyst through which the Fall took place. It was through his scheming that sin and death entered the world.

Satan, Sin and death have been inseparable from the beginning. But as well, God's plan to overcome the devil was also revealed from the beginning.

In **Genesis 3:15** God announced to Satan that the Messiah, the Seed of the woman, would bruise his head and the devil would bruise His heel. But the fulfillment of that prophecy was still a long way off from **Genesis 3**. And death, which had only been known to Adam and Eve conceptually – not experientially – now became an inescapable reality for all human beings. As we heard from our Scripture reading this morning from **Romans chapter 5**...

¹² Through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. [...] ¹⁷ By the transgression of the one, death reigned.

So, while Satan does not control death itself, he is the one who initially drew mankind under the curse of death and he continues to hold them there as their tempter and accuser. In order to save His people, Christ would have to destroy the power the devil had over them.

Now, looking back at our passage in **Hebrews 2**, some translations of **verse 14** say that Christ partook of flesh and blood that he might destroy the devil himself. But the Greek word used here means to render something inoperative, ineffective; to deprive it of force, influence or power. And so, the NASB's translation is more accurate when it says Christ would render the devil powerless.

There will be a day when Satan is destroyed; when he himself will be cast into hell. But that day is still in the future. Satan has not yet been destroyed, but the power he wielded over the children of God has been.

So, how did Christ accomplish that? How did He render Satan powerless? Well **verse 14** tells us He did so through His own death.

Now, think about that: The devil used death to exercise power over mankind. But Christ became a man and *through* death rendered Satan power-less. Our Lord defeated Satan with his own weapon! How awesome is that?! And He did so by conquering death itself by dying and rising to life again.

No mere human could ever have resolved the problem of death because no mere human could ever overcome the grave. This is why Jesus had to take on flesh and blood – because only the Son of God had the authority and the power to break the hold of death.

In **John 10:17-18** Jesus said...

¹⁷ "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."

Only Jesus had the power to overcome death. In fact **Acts 2:24** proclaims that it was impossible for Christ to be held in death's power – couldn't happen!

Our Lord entered the realm of death, broke its bonds, and returned victorious from the grave. And because of His victory, Christ comforts His people saying...

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. (Revelation 1:17 & 18)

By overcoming the grave Christ deprived the devil of one of his greatest weapons against us. Death no longer has the final word for God's people. This is why Jesus can say to you and me, "Because I live, you will live also." (John 14:19) Where the devil had the power of death, Christ has the power of life.

Satan must have thought that the death of Jesus would be his greatest achievement. But it ended up being his undoing because, as **2 Timothy 1:10** boldly proclaims...

[Christ] abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Now, when we say that Christ abolished death, obviously we don't mean that death has ceased to exist. If you are into statistics, then here's one for you: Ten out of every ten people still die. There will be a day when even death itself will be done away with. God promised in **Isaiah 25:18** that a day would come when He will swallow up death for all time. And the Apostle John

was given a vision of that future event in **Revelation chapter 20** where he describes death and Hades being cast into the lake of fire. But **1 Corinthians 15:26** also tells us that the *last* enemy that will be abolished is death. And so, for now, death continues to operate in this world.

So, if death is still an unavoidable reality for every human being, is there any way that believers are benefitted in this lifetime by Christ's defeat of death? Well, **verse 15** answers that question telling us Christ died that...

[He] might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

And so, the 2nd Reason for Christ's incarnation was: To Set Captives Free (v. 15)

Christ took on flesh and blood:

1. To Subdue the Devil
2. And to Set Captives Free

In **verse 14** we learned that the power of Satan was death. Now **verse 15** tells us the power of death is fear.

How does death enslave us? How does it keep us oppressed? Through fear.

When Covid-19 hit, we saw what bondage to the fear of death looks like, didn't we? We saw people paralyzed by the fear of dying. That fear so gripped some people as to rob them of life in the here and now. They stopped living out of fear of dying. Brothers and sisters, Christ died... to free us from captivity to that fear!

But that freedom only comes to us through faith in Christ. It is not a freedom we are born with. In fact, the fear of death infects all people. No one is immune from it. It reaches across all social, political, ethnic, financial and age groups.

Some fear death because of what they will lose. The people and things of this life are dear to them. Others fear death because of what they will receive. As much as they try to suppress the truth in unrighteousness, they can't shake the nagging fear that there really is a holy God who will judge them according to His perfect righteousness. As **Hebrews 9:27** says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

Whether because of what we will lose or because of what we will receive, the fear of death can be an oppressive tyrant. **Verse 15** says it keeps people in slavery all their lives. But Christ lived and died to set us free from that slavery.

So, how does that work? How does faith in Christ free us from enslavement to the fear of death? Well, for those who fear the loss of this life, Christ offers a better life to come. And it isn't just that He offers us eternal life. It isn't only that the life He offers is one of infinite quantity, it is also one of impeccable quality. A life no longer tainted by sin or the curse of the fall.

Revelation 21:4 says of that life...

God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Christ has freed us from the fear of death by promising us eternal life – life that cannot be taken from us. A life free from suffering and sorrow. A life of unimaginable joy and undiminishing exhilaration lived in the presence of God.

And He's promised to go ahead of us and prepare a place for us in glory! He says in **John 4:3**...

"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

For a believer, physical death only leads to everlasting life – an eternity spent marveling and delighting in the wonders of the One who created us. This is why the Apostle Paul could say...

To live is Christ and to die... to die is gain. [...] I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for THAT is very much better. (Philippians 1:21-23)

Paul didn't fear death because he knew whatever he would leave behind couldn't compare to what lay ahead. Christ breaks the fear of losing this life by guaranteeing His people a far better life to come.

And for those who fear death, not because of what they will lose, but because they dread the judgment they will receive, for them Christ offers redemption and forgiveness. He promises in **John 5:24**...

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

To everyone who trusts in Him for their salvation, Christ gives His assurance that His death has fully satisfied the penalty of our sin and that we are forgiven for all time. And if not even death can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, then the fear of death can no longer be held over our heads by the devil as a means of intimidation.

Yes, death is still a relentless reality that no one can escape. But for believers, the power of death – like the power of sin – has been broken through the cross of Jesus Christ. We no longer need to be held captive by the prospect of dying. We have been freed from that bondage. And we can say with Paul, "O death, where is your victory? O death, there is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55)

Now, given all that, you may be wondering, does that mean believers shouldn't fear death at all? Is it sinful for us to fear death even a little? No, it's not sinful to fear death. In fact, there is a way in which the fear of death is appropriate. It is part of the way we were created.

Listen, *before* the fall, God warned Adam not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or he would die (Gen 2:17). And it is pretty clear from Eve's words to the serpent that, up to that point, the fear of death had played a role in her obedience to God's command. That is why part of Satan's temptation of Eve required him to address that fear, telling her she surely would *not* die. He convinced Eve that God had only said that in order to control her and Adam through the fear of death so He could keep them in subjection to Himself.

How Ironic! Satan accused God of the very thing that He himself was about to do! But Satan had to remove the possibility of death from Eve's thinking before he could get her to act in disobedience to God's command. Why? Because there was a pre-fall fear of dying that was intended by God to be healthy and good. A fear that would serve His creatures well if they would heed it.

Now, I want to be quick to say that fear of death was not the only reason – or even the main reason – that Adam and Eve should have obeyed God. They should have obeyed first and foremost because *He is God...* and He is worthy of our obedience.

But clearly, God had given them a warning intending that their fear of the promised consequence would be an incentive for their obedience; which shouldn't surprise us since such warnings are common throughout Scripture. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of warnings that encourage our obedience, in part, through our fear of bad consequences. For Adam and Eve, they were to obey (*first*) because God is deserving of obedience, but also because if they didn't, they would reap the severe consequence of death.

So, human beings in their pre-fall state were created by God to have a healthy fear of death – one that would serve them. That fear helps us to value the life God has given us. We are not to ignore danger or be cavalier about dying. And appropriate fear of death keeps us from taking foolish risks.

But as a result of the Fall every good thing became twisted and tainted by man's sin. And so, the fear of death became enslaving. That is the real issue. It is not fear of death, but being enslaved by the fear of death that is a problem. Because of the fall the fear God intended to serve us became our master. And Satan knows how to wield its power, that through the fear of death, he can keep people oppressed.

The pages of Scripture are full of examples of people, who because they were ruled by the fear of death, sinned against the God who had gave them life. For example, there is the great patriarch Abraham, who lied about Sarah saying she was his sister rather than his wife. Why? Because she was a beautiful woman and Abraham feared that a jealous king would kill him on account of her. He did that not only once, but twice!... first, with Pharaoh (Genesis 12:13) and second, with Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20:1-13).

Then, there is the entire nation of Israel who, when they heard the report of the spies whom they had sent into the Promised Land, refused to enter in, disobeying God's command out of fear that they would fall by the sword of the Canaanites (Numbers 14:1-3). They feared death more than they trusted God's promise to give them the land.

On the other hand, there are also many wonderful examples of those who held their fear of death in submission to their trust in God. Stephen, the first martyr, along with most of the apostles, though threatened with death, did not back down but continued to preach the Gospel and were killed as a result.

Peter, in particular, provides a striking example of a man who was freed from subjugation to the fear of death. Remember how Peter had boasted that even if all the other disciples fell away from Jesus He never would? He told Jesus, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." (Matt. 26:35) But when his bravery was put to the test, Peter denied Jesus... not once... not twice... but three times.

Now, that was before Christ's resurrection. But as Mark preached to us last week, Peter's inspection of the empty tomb began a change in him. The resurrection of Jesus had a profound effect on Peter. And by **chapters 4 and 5 of Acts** we see Peter twice standing up to the threats of the Jewish council refusing to stop preaching the resurrection of Jesus even when they wanted to kill him for doing so (Acts 5:33). And while the Bible doesn't provide an account of how Peter died the writings of the early church fathers Tertullian and Origen state that he died a martyr of the faith, crucified upside down at his own request because he considered himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Savior.

Before Christ's resurrection, Peter's bravado came from within himself. It was a bravery rooted in his flesh, which is why it ultimately failed. But after Christ's resurrection, His willingness to face death came from his faith in Jesus Christ who conquered death and promises eternal life to His people.

The celebrated missionary Jim Elliott, who himself died as a martyr on the mission field, said...

*"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep...
to gain what he cannot lose."*

That has been the source of strength for martyrs throughout church history, even into history that has not yet happened. In **Revelation 12:11** John says of the future Tribulation martyrs...

They overcame [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

Why will these martyrs be willing to die for their faith? Because through the Gospel Christ has freed them from enslavement to the fear of dying.

Satan's tyranny over God's people has come to an end. His chief weapon – the fear of death – has been stripped of its power. And we, who were subject to its bondage, have been set free.

Now, we come to **verse 16**, and this verse is not a reason for the incarnation...

- but an affirmation of its benefit to us.

For assuredly He [that is, Christ] does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

We'll talk a bit more about this verse next time but for now, recognize that God has chosen to deal with man in a way that He has not chosen to deal with even the angelic beings. Jesus did not become an angel to save fallen angels. But He became a man in order to save fallen human beings. He put on flesh to save the likes of you and me.

God has not revealed to us why He chose to intervene where mankind was concerned. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that not all of the angels rebelled against God. **Revelation 12:4** seems to indicate it was about one third of the angels who joined Satan in his mutiny. And so, the majority of angels have no need of salvation. But where mankind was concerned, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). Every last one of us is guilty of disobedience to our Maker and deserving of eternal punishment. So, maybe it was because all of mankind would be condemned. Not one of us could escape judgement without the intervention of a Savior. Perhaps that is why God in His eternal decree decided to act on our behalf.

Or, perhaps it was because we were made in His image. Maybe God chose to magnify Himself by saving the creatures He had created for the purpose of reflecting of His own glory.

Whatever the reason, we can be certain that it was not because men are more deserving in any way or that there is anything in us worthy of redemption. No, our salvation is an act of absolute grace!

Regardless of WHY God chose to intervene on our part, the fact that He sent His Son to put on flesh and to die so that the curse of death would be broken is such an amazing truth that **1 Peter 1:12** says these are “things into which angels long to look.”

It is not angels who are the beneficiaries of the help Christ provides. But notice as well, neither is it the descendants of Adam or the sons of man. In other words, Christ’s aid is not given to all people but only to the descendant of Abraham.

So, what is meant by that term “the descendant of Abraham”? Does this refer to those who are physical descendants of the patriarch? Those of Abraham’s bloodline? No! **Galatians 3:7** tells us plainly, “It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.”

It is believers who are Abraham’s spiritual descendants. And so, the “children of God” who we talked about in **verse 14** and the “descendant of Abraham” mentioned in **verse 16** are one in the same. They include everyone who has been saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

And so, understand that the help Christ gives, the help that renders the devil powerless and frees us from enslavement to the fear of death, is only given to followers of Jesus. If you haven’t trusted in Christ alone for your salvation, then you need to fear death. You need to fear Satan’s indictments. You need to fear eternal punishment. Because without Christ, it is foolish *not* to fear!

I entitled today’s sermon “Liberty or Death” based on a slogan from the American Revolution. But those words also accurately summarize the choice that the Gospel sets before each one of us today. We can either live our lives as slaves of sin and death or we can enjoy freedom in Christ -- freedom from Satan’s accusations, and intimidation; freedom from the penalty, guilt and shame of sin; freedom from the oppression of the fear of death. That is the choice presented to every person by the Gospel. Which course will you take? Will it be liberty? Or will it be death?

Today, as Americans, we celebrate the political freedom we have been blessed with. There will be cook-outs and fireworks, and all of that is right and good to enjoy. We should celebrate the blessing of liberty we have been graced with. But if we celebrate our freedom from political tyranny with such enthusiasm, how much more should we celebrate our freedom from the tyranny of Satan, sin and death!

Christ is risen from the grave. He defeated death *by* death. He has subdued the devil, and set the captives free. Let's thank God together now for the freedom He has granted us in Christ.