

Easter Sunday: Death Swallowed Up!

1 Cor. 15:50-58, Isa. 25:6-9

David C. Dixon

Introduction: What special memory do *you* associate with Easter? Does any outstanding remembrance come to mind related to this time of year? The special memory for me is that this was when my dad went to be with the Lord. In fact, this year marks the 20th anniversary of his death. Easter was always a special event in our lives, but his passing made it even more so.

Prov. 30:15–16 says, **“There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’”** Notice how first place is given to the grave! Psalm 49 says that death is actually our shepherd; another translation says more graphically that death is “feeding” on us, generation after generation – what a gruesome portrait! It feels like we’re being stalked. I assume most everyone heard about the recent Nashville shooting at a private school. A church security expert who advises churches and church-based schools regarding response strategies for keeping people safe when they come together for worship or other ministries, gave this evaluation: he said that one of the grim things about that event was how the school, the police, teachers and parents, all did everything right and six people still died. Seems like death is stalking us.

Ian Bremmer is a well-known political scientist who recently wrote *The Power of Crisis: How Three Threats—And Our Response—Will Change the World*. In it these are the threats he talks about: 1) how our world is still reeling from the long-lasting economic, political, and social effects of Covid-19, and other more deadly viruses to come will push the world farther down that path; 2) how climate change is upending the lives of billions, threatening the sustainability of life on our planet; 3) how new technologies are impacting how we live, think, and interact in unexpected ways, and may do more damage to our species than any other crisis in history. Of course, this frightening mix also includes mounting geopolitical tensions that often feel out of control. In his first inaugural address (30 years ago), President Bill Clinton claimed, “There is nothing *wrong with America* that cannot be cured by *what is right with America*.” Sounds like wonderful American optimism. But Bremmer’s book seriously questions the validity of that view: **what is wrong with humans cannot be cured by humans.**

1) Over two and a half millennia ago, the prophet Isaiah had already come to this very same conclusion. In Isaiah 24, he described the human dilemma in the most drastic terms of devastation and utter hopelessness because of the disastrous human decision to try to navigate this life according to our own criteria instead of under the Lord’s shepherding. Then in Isaiah 25 the prophet continues analyzing our dilemma in terms of a sheet that is spread over all nations, like a shroud in which all peoples are wrapped. This dates back to the Garden of Eden, where humanity handed over lordship of this planet to the father of lies, the emperor of death, and he’s been working hard ever since to eliminate the image of God from our vocabulary and thoughts, installing in its place the “culture of

death,” which is making faster inroads in our society than the Gospel of Jesus! But Isaiah then has an **amazing vision** in which he foresees the day when God will bring the definitive solution: He will prepare a magnificent feast for all the peoples of the world.

V. 6: **“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.”** The mountain referred to here is, of course, Mt. Zion (Jerusalem), and the main course for the feast will be nothing less than the destruction of death.

V. 7: **“On this mountain he will destroy the sheet that covers all peoples, the shroud that enfolds all nations.”** The sheet and shroud in this verse are references to death, but v. 8 is still more explicit.

V. 8: **“he will swallow up death forever.”** Some translations use the word “destroy” in both these verses, but the Hebrew term *bala* (בָּלָא) really means “swallow up.” Isaiah perceives God Himself as the One who will destroy death by “swallowing it up,” by devouring it – and then wiping away all the tears and freeing His people from their shame and disgrace. Then this amazing vision ends with Isaiah’s affirmation that *this* is the God we’ve been *waiting* for, the Savior we’ve been hoping for! Yes! Someone who would save us from the final defeat of death and ultimate disgrace!

2) So today, 2,700 years later, was that only a dream, only wishful thinking? Or is the Gospel light “at the end of the tunnel” real? The voice of our society will clamor, “Of course, it’s not real! It’s just a legendary myth based on humanity’s senseless desire for immortality.” The prophet himself could not fathom exactly how his vision might become reality, but he didn’t doubt it for a moment. And Isaiah’s faith would persist down through the centuries, shared by Jesus Himself, and vindicated in His **Gospel**. So we want to interpret our resurrection text for this morning, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, in light of Isaiah’s vision.

V. 50: **“I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”** We are well aware that our physical bodies are not eternal, in spite of all the medical advances. They eventually wear out and our earthly identity becomes only a memory. So the Kingdom of God, which Jesus brought to fulfillment in His life, death, and resurrection, transcends this world and its history. Paul is pointing us to something beyond this physical existence.

V. 51: **“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”** Here Paul is referring to the second coming of Jesus, when He returns to bring human history to its completion and consummation. That’s when resurrection will be fulfilled and manifested here.

Vv. 52-54: **“For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”** So in Jesus’ resurrection this must have been fulfilled: His perishable mortal body was clothed with imperishable immortality.

3) And was this also what was happening *at the cross*? It looked a lot more like *death was swallowing up Jesus* – but looks can be so deceiving! We talked about it on Friday – when the apostle Paul says that at the cross Jesus was disarming the principalities and powers (the spiritual rulers of darkness), making a public spectacle of them, even though it looked more like that’s what they were doing to Him: Jesus was the one strung up naked, bleeding and dying, shamed, humiliated, beaten down – but we have to take a deeper look at this to see what was really going on! Jesus

wasn't submitting to those false powers for one moment – He refused to give in to their lies! He was remaining strong in the faith under the worst possible circumstances; He was beating the enemy – with His hands tied behind His back? NO! With His hands and feet nailed to a cross! All the odds were against Him! Disciples had run away (one betrayed, one denied), humanity was in full rebellion, in cahoots with God's worst enemy. Everybody against Him – except God! And maybe you're wondering about when Jesus cries out, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** As often occurs in the Psalms, this is a rhetorical question in Psalm 22, not a statement of fact. And this psalm is so full of Messianic prophecy and promises that it must be taken in context, where the original question is cleared up in v. 24: ***"For [God] has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help."*** Heb. 12:3 tells us it was *from sinners* that Jesus had to endure such opposition – not from God! The night before His crucifixion, when Jesus told His disciples that they were all going to abandon Him, He assured them that His Father, on the other hand, was always with Him (Jn. 16:32). Yet someone will ask, "What about our sins? Didn't they separate Jesus from the Father?" What sins are we talking about? All the ones that were committed against Jesus that day while He was being tried and crucified? What was happening to those sins? Scripture says Jesus was the only one on earth who was authorized to forgive sins, and that's what He did with every sin heaped on Him that day (Lk. 23:34)! So **God was WITH Him** (His very name was Immanuel, Mt. 1:23); **God was FOR Him** (Rom. 8:31); **God was IN Him** (reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us, 2 Cor. 5:19)!

Conclusion: So in effect, Jesus was indeed carrying out Isaiah's vision on the cross: "swallowing up death" with His own indestructible life (Heb. 7:16), ***devouring it from the inside!*** – though the news would not become public until Easter morning, when the angel announced, ***"Why are you seeking the living among the dead? He is not here – He is risen!"*** And then the women who had gone to the tomb to anoint the body became the first evangelists, running back to the apostles to give them the good news!

So according to Isaiah's vision, *this* is the banquet that the nations are invited to, the feast we must nourish our souls on daily, the hope that sustains us in our darkest hour and transforms us as we stay focused on it. Death's dominion over us has been annulled by our living Savior – the grave no longer has the final word on humanity and creation, no matter how dark our planet's future may look! No matter what storm clouds are brewing on the horizon, no matter what crises are threatening our economic security, physical security, or political stability! Our God came for us and triumphed – first on the cross, then over the grave! This is our confidence – will you embrace it? Will you hold it close, cherish it, apply it to your thorniest problems, affirm it in your daily living?! And will you be a part of spreading the good news?