

Sermon 3-24-19
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Based on the lessons for the Third Sunday in Lent

How Not To Perish

We have three lessons today that absolutely have something in common. Hopefully you saw it, but if not I'll trace it for you. Ezekiel, 33:11, "11 [Ezekiel,] Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'" 1 Corinthians 10:6, "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they [Israel] did [for 40 years in the desert]." 1 Corinthians 10:11, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages [Jesus] has come." Luke 13:4-5, "[Jesus said,] 4 'Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'"

So what do these lessons have in common? First, we are all rebels. Second, God takes no pleasure in punishing rebels. Third, it's our Creator's desire that we turn and repent of our rebellion and evil. Fourth, the impenitent will perish if they don't repent.

Of course, death is a nasty reality of this life. All of us were born to face death. So, when Jesus promised His listeners that they would all perish, what did He mean? His statement was set in the context of nasty, unexpected, tragic, terrifying, painful, and horrible deaths – much like hearing of an airliner falling out the sky or a mass shooting in our time. Using the tragedy at the tower of Siloam, Jesus was warning the people of Jerusalem in 32 or 33A.D. that if they did not repent, those alive in 70A.D. would be facing a similar tragic death. Only it would be a cruel and prolonged death from starvation, disease and injury in the terrible nightmarish Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem. They would all perish.

But hidden in His word there is another sense of all perishing and that is in the eternal sense – a death beyond the death of the mortal body in this world. In the book of Revelation, we're introduced to this terrible death beyond death. It's called the Second Death. We read in Revelation 21:8, "... 'the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.'" This lake of burning sulfur is one of the places in Scripture where the picture of hell as a hot and horrible place comes from.

It's also where a second modern picture of Yahweh as a punishing tyrannical God comes from. But this modern picture is a false picture based on what we read in Ezekiel. Yahweh takes no pleasure in the death of the rebellious.

However, the rebellious are rebellious no matter how great the consequences may be – even a second death. And that’s the point of Revelation 21:8. We’re like small children who want our own way, no matter how dangerous and foolish. Then we hate our parents when they correct us and lead us out of danger. We don’t want our Creator’s correction and salvation.

So, if we insist on our way to the end, in the end, He says, “fine. Have it your way.” But in a gross act of rebellion we complain bitterly about the existence of the second death, calling Yahweh unjustified and blaming Yahweh for it, instead of ourselves.

If Yahweh, in fact, is our Creator, then we truly are not our own. We are His. Therefore, rebellion against Him has consequences, and all His actions toward us are justifiable. And that’s the very thing that our sinful nature hates the most. For, we want to be our own, free of any and all consequences.

I recall a Youtube video of a Christian apologetics conference on a college campus. A young female student challenged the speaker during the question and answer session. She said to him in a derogatory way, “Are you saying, I’m going to hell?” The student said this to put the speaker on the defensive, in effect accusing him of being a tyrannical moral judge sent by a punishing, tyrannical God.

There’s an important thing we need to understand about this exchange. In reality who was judging whom? Was it not the student judging the Christian presenter? Of course. The rebellious sinful nature quite often defends itself by this well-known tactic of projecting guilt upon Yahweh and His servants instead of accepting guilt. We see it all the time in the pages of Scripture. In fact, we saw it last week when the people of Jerusalem wanted to persecute Jeremiah for prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem that came in 587B.C.

Now, this young woman needed to understand something important, as we all do. If someone hates Yahweh and wants nothing to do with Him, should they not get what they want for all eternity? As I have often said, the only problem with that comes from who Yahweh is. He is the source of all love, righteousness, justice and goodness. He *is* all love, righteousness, justice and goodness. So, if you don’t want Yahweh, it means you don’t want real love, righteousness, justice and goodness. Instead, you want some fake love, righteousness, justice and goodness of your own defining.

This “love”, “righteousness” “justice” and “goodness” of our own defining is in reality evil. We just don’t see how it can be. This is because we live in a world where Yahweh’s love, righteousness, justice and goodness are active in spite of our rebellion. Therefore, the full consequences of our own rebellious defining don’t necessarily hit us. But Jesus was warning us that this is not true beyond physical death.

The thing that makes the Lake of Fire the eternal horror it is, is the absence of Yahweh. He will not be present to those in the Lake of Fire. Therefore, there will be no love, righteousness, justice or goodness in that place except what the occupants define for themselves. And judging by the preview we get of defining things for ourselves in this world, it won’t be pretty. It will be a no holds barred perpetual bar fight/holocaust/world war with everyone perpetually blaming everyone else and none accepting responsibility. It will be quite horrible. But those there would not

want it any other way. They will be free of Yahweh and His Messiah forever. That's what they want more than anything, and are willing to pay any price to receive.

It's clear, therefore, that in order for anyone to be saved from such a fate, something has got to die. That something is the rebellion, the sinful nature that rejects Yahweh and His Messiah. A new nature, a different and righteous nature, must take its place.

Now, the death of the old nature and the receiving of the new righteous nature is the eternal destiny of those who enter through the eternal gates of the Kingdom of God. When they enter, the sinful nature with its desire to define things for itself will be forever gone. In its place will be the eternal love, righteousness, justice and goodness of Yahweh, our Creator. In the Kingdom of God Yahweh's definitions – and only His – will exist in everyone's mind and heart. This is what makes the Kingdom of God a blessed realm – a place of light and joy and peace and glorious truth. Scripture declares that those who by grace come to long for such a relationship with Yahweh shall have it.

Consider just these few verses from Revelation 22:3-5, "3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." This is the glorious future for the people Yahweh claims as His own.

Therefore, how is it that the rebellious sinful nature can die and the new nature take its place? The simple answer is Jesus. The Son of God suffered and died so that the sinful nature would die with Him. He was raised from the dead so that we might have our sins forgiven and be made alive in righteousness with Him.

The people who were standing around Jesus when He spoke that they should repent or otherwise perish probably didn't understand that He was referring to Himself. He meant that they needed to repent of their rejection of God's Messiah or perish.

For, all those who repent of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah and receive Him by faith escape the Second Death. As it says in Revelation 20:6, "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years." The first resurrection is the new birth, the death of the sinful nature and the birth of the new nature. And all who are given this new birth will be priests, meaning they will bring God to people and people to God through Jesus the great High Priest.

Now, we know from Scripture that everything about this new birth and this first resurrection depends on the Word of God and faith. The reason is simple. Nothing in the nature of this world changes via the new birth. In fact, the nature and power of the rebellious sinful nature itself does not change. It is still present in all who are born again. For example, did you notice all the evil Christians need to beware of that St. Paul laid out in the lesson from 1Corinthians? Setting our hearts on evil things. Idolatry. Sexual Immorality. Even Grumbling, especially grumbling against God.

Therefore, the sinful nature is only dead by faith in the Word of God that it has been put to death in Christ Jesus, and that we will finally be rid of it at physical

death. In the same way, the new nature is alive in us only by faith in the Word of God that it is so. For Jesus has been raised from the dead. But, again, we will not be fully given this new nature until physical death. And that, by the way, is the great consolation of every believer in the face of physical death. Jesus has been raised from the dead in perfect righteousness. And so shall we. Therefore, as long as we breathe air on this earth, we are dead to sin only by faith and alive to God only by faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ upon the cross. And such faith only comes by the Word of Christ.

Now, this is not to say that faith in Jesus has no real effect here. For, as long as we are in this world we are in a war of words. Who are you going to believe? There are only two possibilities – God and anybody else, including yourself. Who you believe and what you believe influences the whole course of your life. Therefore, believing Jesus makes all the difference.

Nowhere is this more dramatically demonstrated than at a testimony meeting of some kind. Over the years I've attended meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous open to the public and various Christian testimony meetings. Indeed, here at Trinity, we've heard testimonies from the women of the Hoving Home. The downhill spiral of addiction and evil living is hideous and pathetic. It's hard to imagine if you've never experienced it. It's hard for me to imagine it. But when you hear their stories it's absolutely amazing to see a sane person testifying to God's goodness in front of you simply because they began to believe the twelve steps or they began to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. How is such a change possible?

Well, God is as good as His Word. And that Word has never changed. Consider what Yahweh said through the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 33:13-16, "13 If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done. 14 And if I say to the wicked man, "You will surely die," but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right ... 16 None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live."

These verses tell us that it's not how we start out that counts with Yahweh. It's how we end our lives. Some people will start well, but foolishly think they can depart from Yahweh and still be accepted by Him at the end of their lives. Others depart from Yahweh and go their way early on. But if the Lord is merciful and a day comes when they've had enough of their rebellion, they turn to Yahweh and are accepted by Him, no matter what they've done. And as opposed to the time of Ezekiel, here in New Testament times Yahweh most graciously has provided assurance that this is so, assurance that the rebellion has been put to death and the new life has been brought into existence. His Name is Jesus.

Jesus makes all the difference. Those who will receive Him and His Father's Word come to sanity because they have believed the truth, and the truth has set them free from the lies of the sinful nature and the devil.

God's truth is that we are not our own. He is our Creator. To pray, "Our Father who art in heaven," is to acknowledge this in the deepest and most profound way. To pray, "Thy Kingdom come and Thy will be done" is to ask again in a profound

way to be disconnected from the sinful nature and be joined to Yahweh by faith in Jesus Christ. For our bodies are His temple.

So, this morning we have again the opportunity to declare Yahweh justified in all His actions toward us. We each have the opportunity to do this individually. We have the opportunity to do this together as Christ's Church.

By grace, let's move up into that third plane of faith. O Lord, You have the right to depart from us if we insist on departing from You. You have the right to let us perish in our rebellion if that's what we insist upon. But, O Lord, have mercy on us. Save us from our deadly fascination with the rebellion and evil that brings us to the Lake of Fire. Come, Lord Holy Spirit. We have heard what Moses and the prophets said. We have heard what Jesus and the Apostles have taught. Alone in you is all true love, righteousness, justice and goodness. Forgive us for falsely imagining such things for ourselves and lead us into the truth. Grant us faith to confess that Jesus is Lord. Grant us mercy to die with Christ in baptism and be raised with Him to your kind of life. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.