

The Sting of Death

~ the late Myron Martin

Editor's note: *This article is reprinted from the July 1994 issue of The Pilgrim Witness. Brother Myron, who went to be with the Lord in 1992 after a protracted battle with cancer, wrote this in the latter years of his life.*

There is an account of a marathon swimmer that swam across part of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Florida. Even though she swam inside a cage to ward off large fish, the crew on the accompanying boat were constantly on the lookout for the stingray fish which can give a fatal poisonous sting. This illustration gives a number of parallels to the title taken from 1 Corinthians 15:56, which mentions "*the sting of death is sin.*" It is very true that sin does sting death to each spiritual life it is allowed to penetrate. No one has the immunity to fight off the deadly effects of sin. Only the power of the blood of Christ can revive us. As in the illustration, we must constantly be on the lookout for attacks of sin in our lives, so we can continue to have a vibrant spiritual life in Christ Jesus.

As we look at the context of this verse, we find Paul's main emphasis was not describing the effects of sin on the spiritual life, but how one relates to physical death. In verse 35 Paul raises a question, "*How are the dead raised up?*" which is a very intriguing question to anyone who is pondering the truths of the resurrection. Paul goes on to explain in verses 35-54 that God has picturesquely revealed the mystery of the resurrection in the seeds that we plant.

Just as the planted seed decays, and yet from it comes forth a new life, so the natural life will be transformed into a new, incorruptible body. That illustration makes it easier for us to understand, yet there are many unknowns as we view death. Paul agrees in verse 51 by saying, "*Behold, I show you a mystery.*"

As we envision moving from this life into the next, it is only natural for us to have some apprehensions. As our humanity faces the ending of this physical life and the unknowns of death, there is that painfulness as a sting that can envelope us. But is that the way God expects His children to face death?

Various accounts in Scripture show us the experiences of God's children moving from this life into the next through the gate of death, and none of them have any sign of reservation. Think about Abraham, Jacob, David, Paul, Stephen, and Jesus. Each exemplify the testimony of Paul when he said, "*I am now ready to be offered.*" We want to take some lessons from their lives so we likewise are ready to experience death without the sting of death.

Paul's words, "*I have kept the faith,*" in 2 Timothy 4:7, give three important aspects needed for one to be "*ready to be offered.*" First, Paul kept his faith in Christ's provision of salvation. It is only by the blood of Jesus Christ that we can be freed from the condemnation of sin and stand justified before Almighty God.

Secondly, "*I have kept*" implies that he put forth effort to work out his faith, and even though he went through many trials that could have caused him to give up, yet he was still holding on to the faith. It is only those that come to the end of life and can say with Paul, "*Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory [in our spiritual lives] through our Lord Jesus Christ,*" and have overcome the sting of spiritual death, that will be able to face physical death without anxieties and fears of meeting Almighty God. The more we live by the power of the resurrection in the everyday experiences of life and feel the leading hand of the Shepherd, the more prepared we will be to fear no evil as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, knowing that the same power will give us the power over the second death.

Paul's testimony, "*I have fought a good fight,*" expressed a third reason why he was ready for death. Think how different Paul would have felt if his testimony were like that of the songwriter who wrote, "Must I go and empty handed?" Could one feel ready to leave this life if he had not done something worthwhile for his Lord? There is no comparison to the emptiness at the end of life of one that says, "I did the things that I wanted to do," versus the satisfaction of those that can say with Jesus, "*I*

have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.” I am sure the work that Paul had accomplished for the Lord was a lot more fulfilling than to think of the few tents he had made and wonder if they were rotten or even used anymore. May we lift our eyes above the fickle things of life and put our energies into the eternal work of God, so when we leave this life we can look forward to enjoying the treasures we have stored up in heaven.

It is not only the life of fulfillment that takes the sting out of death, but the submission to accept God’s will in the things we cannot change. Moses is a good example as he faced death and longed to go into the Promised Land, but God said “no.” In response Moses said, *“I am an hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in: also the Lord hath said unto me, Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.... And Joshua, he shall go over before thee, as the Lord hath said”* (Deut 31:2-3). As one faces death, many things are still before us that we would enjoy doing, yet only as we are ready to say with Jesus, *“Not my will but thine be done,”* can we have real peace as we leave this life. God knows best what our work is and what work He wants others to finish.

God’s promise of life beyond death also takes the sting out of death for the Christian. But so often we recreate the sting of death for ourselves because we are too attracted to the things of this life, and cringe from the idea of leaving them behind. We will never experience complete victory over the sting of death unless we lift our eyes above this world and bathe ourselves in the picturesque description of heaven and envision the tranquility of being with our Lord and Savior. Then only will we be able to grow on into Christian maturity and have such an anticipation to be with Him that the shadow of death becomes insignificant compared to the brightness of our heavenly home.

If we will be able to say with Paul, *“O death, where is thy sting?”* we must put forth effort to live each day in preparation for death. Right after these verses, Paul concludes the chapter by saying, *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord”* (1Cor 15:58).

Let us have the balance of enjoying serving Him here and yet always being ready and waiting for the day when we will be translated from this life and will enjoy serving Him in the glories beyond.