

Life and Teachings of Paul

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The Conquest Imagery

In the New Testament, conversion to Christ is depicted as a turn from darkness and an escape from the power of Satan. In 1 John 3:8 we are told that the reason the Son of God entered into our world was to destroy Satan:

*He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was **to destroy the work of the devil.** (1 John 3:8.)*

In Acts 26:18, Saul of Tarsus (before he became the Apostle Paul) was told that his mission as an apostle of Christ was to go to the Gentiles with the message of deliverance from the darkness of evil and the power of Satan:

*Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and **turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God,** so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. (Acts 26:16-18).*

Paul was to take the declaration of **Christ's conquest of Satan** to a world in darkness, most of who were under the power of Satan. This story he called "*euangelion*," good new or a message of rejoicing - the gospel. How had Christ accomplished the overthrow of Satan? The writer of the epistles to the Hebrews says that it was accomplished by his death:

*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that **by his death** he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14).*

But it was not from his death, in and of itself, that he destroyed “him who held the power of death.” From the portrayal of the risen Jesus in the Apostle John’s book called the *Apokalupsis Iesou Christou* (the Revelation of Jesus Christ), Jesus is revealed to John as having conquered Satan by overcoming Satan’s power to hold him captive in the realm of death and keep him under the curse of death passed upon Adam.

*When I saw him [the Risen Christ], I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! **And I hold the keys of death and Hades.** (Rev 1:17-18.)*

The Death of Death

Making sense of the death of Christ was of major concern for the Paul. Perhaps, this is why he was so opposed to Christianity in its earliest days. After all, who could believe in a Messiah who did not have the power prevent himself from being put to death as an insurrectionist? What kind of Deliverer dies at the hand of his enemies? However, once Paul saw Jesus of Nazareth alive, he realized that his death was not what it appeared to be; there must have been a meaning hidden within in that others did not see. Throughout Paul's letters he discusses his understanding of the meaning and significance of Christ's death, which he came to believe was an act of divine reversal; i.e., what happened to man in the fall had been reversed through the resurrection of Christ.

From the narrative of Gen 1-3, one learns that man had fallen through his disbelief and had become subject to the satanic powers of sin and death. God had set before man an exercise of his free will represented by two trees that stood in the garden, the tree of life, which could bring life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which could bring death (Gen 2:8, 15;

3:1ff).

God had revealed to Adam everything he needed to know in order to have a complete sense of well being or happiness as long as he remained in the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. Everything God had said to him was true; all that was necessary to the happiness of Adam was to believe God's words and live out God's promises in his life. Adam, however, chose to believe the words of Satan rather than the words of his Creator. The Words of Satan asserted that what God had said was a lie and the words Satan was saying were the truth. Eve, and then Adam, ate the forbidden fruit, believing that they would gain the knowledge that would make them equal to God, and thus came the fall of man. "In the day you eat thereof, you shall surely die," God had told Adam, and on that day he and Eve were driven from the garden paradise, from the presence of God, and into the earth in a pilgrimage through a vale of soul making to the grave. Not only had the curse of death been passed upon them, but to their offspring as well, i.e., the whole of the human race, "adamic man," had become mortal (Gen 2:17; 3:17ff).

The curse of death was passed on to the offspring of Adam by virtue of the entrance of mortality into the world. Whether they were created immortal and became mortal by the fall or were created mortal with the possibility of immortality through access to the tree of life is not known. What we do know is that all mankind, as son of Adam, are born mortal and are subject to death. We all enter the realm of death at the conclusion of our lives here on earth. Some have temporarily returned to life, but only in postponement of death; the only exceptions are Enoch and Elijah, who appear to have escaped death.

Jesus of Nazareth as a *ben Adam*, "a son of Adam" experienced human death as one subject to the curse of death by virtue of his adamic nature as a member of the human race. However, by the power of his belief in God's promise to reverse his death, he escaped from the realm of death by a resurrection into a new existence, a new creative act of God. Not only did he escape death by his resurrection, he destroyed its power to hold in death those who had experienced this new creation. Christ not only destroyed the power of death by his resurrection, he destroyed the

power of sin and consequently the power of death.

Resurrection into New Existence

What distinguishes the resurrection of Christ from other resurrections, such as that of Lazarus, is that Lazarus was raised back into his old existence (adamic existence) where the powers of sin and death reign over man. Christ was raised into a new existence where the powers of grace and eternal life reign (Rom 5:21). In the resurrection existence Christ now enjoys, sin and death have no presence or power. These are powers limited to the existence of Adam; to those in Christ, these powers are limited to the adamic body of man, but not the spirit, which will be transformed at the return of Jesus (1 Cor 15:35-57; 1 Thess 4:13-18).

The curse of death was passed upon man as a being created out of the earth. When one dies to adamic existence, the curse is fulfilled or accomplished. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was a resurrection into new existence, an otherworldly dimension of existence that all those in Christ will receive at the resurrection. This is the message that stands at the heart of Paul's good news for the human race. Paul's theology of the divine reversal of the fall is found beautifully developed in the 15th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, specifically, 15:20-28, 42-49; also in 2 Cor 5:17-20; and Romans 5:12-21.

The Concept of Divine Reversal

The concept with which we are working here is that of "divine reversal" - a reversal of the story of the fall of man. The first Adam was given a choice, the "promise of life" as set over against "the curse of death." The original Adam chose death thinking that Satan's words were true and he would receive knowledge that would make him equal to the Creator. That choice resulted in death, not only for himself, but also for all of his offspring as mortal beings. Christ came into the world as an offspring of the first Adam and as such experienced human death, but he represented a second or last Adam as concerns his rewriting the story of the first Adam. Because of his faith and faithfulness to God, he was resurrected into new

existence. Just as God breathed into the lifeless form of Adam and he became a living being, in reenactment of the creation of the first Adam, God breathed into the lifeless body of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth and he became a living being of a new existence; an existence free from the power of sin and the curse of death (cf., Rom 5:12, 15-19; 1 Cor 15:20-28, 42-49).

God entered into our existence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and re-lived and/or re-enacted the story of Adam, which is now "our story." In this second temptation event the adversary (Hebrew-*Shatan* Greek-*satanas*) tried to tempt second Adam in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus chose belief and obedience resulting in eternal life rather than the curse of death. Jesus, as the second Adam, believed the words of God rather than Satan and sealed that choice with his own blood, dying as a son of Adam, as one of us, believing all the while that God would raise him from death. In his death he died to his existence "in Adam." In his resurrection, however, he was raised into new existence, not back into his old existence in Adam. In 1 Cor 15:20, 23, Paul calls him "the *aparche*," a Greek word meaning, "the first," translated in most English versions as "firstfruit," i.e., the firstfruit of the crop; i.e. that which is brought forth out of the earth into life.

Here Paul is speaking of those who will be resurrected into new existence; Christ first then those who are in Christ. The consequence of Christ's death and resurrection was the reversal of the curse of death for those who are in Christ, by means of their union or oneness with him (2 Cor 5:17). The promise of life has replaced the curse of death for those who have become one with the new Adam by experiencing new creation and are now, "in Christ."

Conclusion

The impact of all this to those who remain one with the old Adam, in terms of disbelief and disobedience, the curse of sin and death continue to rule in their lives. This is what the expressions, new birth, regeneration, and new creation is all about. The way we are identified with the old Adam is through birth; we were born into an adamic existence where sin

and death reign. In the same manner we become one with the new Adam through birth, we experience a spiritual birth wherein we die to our old existence in Adam, and symbolically bury that existence in the watery grave of baptism, and are raised into new existence in Christ, where grace, life, and God reign (cf. Rom 6:1-11; 1 Cor 15: 21; 2 Cor 5:17).

What dies in human death is the adamic body or the flesh with its passions, to which Paul gives great attention in his letters (Rom 6:19; 7:5, 18, 25; 8:1-13; 13:14; 2 Cor 7:1; Gal 2:16; 5:16-24; Eph 2:3). What lives on after that death is what is regenerated in conversion - the human spirit - this is that part of us that has experienced new creation and transformation as a spiritual being. This is how a man in Adam becomes a holy one of God (a saint), by dying to his or her old existence "in Adam" and becoming a new creation "in Christ;" and most importantly, the one whose life now becomes a reflection of a being created in the image of God. While yet dwelling in our adamic bodies we experience the ongoing tensions that exists between the desires of the flesh and the desire of our regenerated spirit, until our adamic existence ends in the death of the body. Then, at his return, Christ will transform the bodies of those in him into the new existence he enjoys, making our bodies like his (1 Cor 15:20-26, 35-57), reuniting the body with the spirit in new otherworldly or eschatological existence.

In conversion to Christ we become one with Christ in who we are (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 8:29; Col 3:5-10; Eph 4:22-5:2). The means of access into this new existence is belief, or better, "**believing that this will happen,**" as did Jesus in his belief that God would raise him up. This must be believed with such depth that our lives become transformed by what we believe. The kind of faith that makes such a thing happen is the kind of faith that Jesus exemplified in his life (Heb 5:8-9 and Phil 3:9 [the Greek text in this texts reads "the faith of Christ"]). If the disbelief of the first Adam could have had such an effect on humankind, then the belief of the second Adam can have as great an effect on the human race. In fact, the belief of Christ and his submission to the will of God in Gethsemane was an event of cosmic significance.

Our faith can have as great an effect on our own individual existence

as did the faith of Jesus, but that faith must have content and focus. The content is the Jesus story and the focus is the central player of that story. Essential to his story is what he has done to bring about the divine reversal of an existence enslaved to sin and death to an existence that has experienced a foretaste of eternal life spiritually and will be made complete at his return (Rom 10:9-10; 1 John 5:4-5). Paul concludes his discourse on the redemptive effects of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15, with a triumphant cry of conquest:

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in conquest." 55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your conquest?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the conquest through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54-57).

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