

# “The Secret of a Victorious Life”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 22, 2005

Text: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

This morning I would like to place before you two verses of scripture. The first is from Ecclesiastes 9:1-3. “Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. ”

The second is from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

The Book of Ecclesiastes has one theme that runs through its entirety: “Vanity of Vanity,” says the Preacher, “All is Vanity.” The Hebrew word for “Vanity” is the word “Hebel,” which means “breath,” “air,” or “vapor.” For Ecclesiastes life is like the wind. It is very fleeting. For him God is distant, his purposes unknowable, and his nature a mystery. For Ecclesiastes the

notion of “eternal life” is likewise an idle dream. “That which befalls the sons of men befalls the beasts...as one dies, so the other.” There is, according to Ecclesiastes, a certain pessimism and meaninglessness about life. The sun rises and sets. The seas run to the ocean, yet the ocean is not filled. There is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11).

Ecclesiastes notes that there is certain impartiality to life. “All things come alike to all,” he writes. Long ago, on Calvary, there were three crosses. On one was a thief, profane and blasphemous; an other a thief repentant. On the third was the most divine spirit that ever blest the earth. Yet, all three died. “All things come alike to all.”

I thought about that verse this past December. In the midst of the tragic Tsunami waves in South Asia, hundreds of thousands of people died. Some were simple fishermen. Some were tourist on a post Christmas holiday. Some were young. Some were old. All met the same fate.

## I.

In his letter to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul deals with the same issue, but comes to an amazingly different conclusion. “All things work together for good,” he writes, “for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.”

Now, how could Paul make that kind of statement? It certainly was not true in his own life. In his letter to the church at Corinth he gives an account of some of the things that he had experienced. “Five times,” he writes, “I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he received a stoning. Three times he was shipwrecked, and for a night and a day was adrift at sea. Paul faced dangers from bandits, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness and dangers at sea. Moreover, he was viciously attacked by people in the very churches he had started.

So here they stand, face to face. Ecclesiastes finds a certain cynicism to life. “All things come alike to all people.” Paul concludes that, “All things work together to them that love God and who are called according to his purposes.” On another occasion Paul concluded that “suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Yet, you and I both know that that is not the way things often work. For many people suffering produces disillusionment, depression, despair, and disbelief. Sometimes I see young people who begin so filled with optimism and hope. But life wears them down. Suffering stifles their spirit and tragedy crushes their hopes.

Yet, that was not the experience of the Apostle Paul. He speaks of something else: being strengthened in his inner spirit, learning how to abound and how to abase, and about being able to do all things through Christ who strengthens him. Even at the point of death he was able to look back on his life and say, “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”

So how does a person discover that?

## II.

For one thing, Ecclesiastes was right. There is certain impartiality in life. Jesus observed in the Sermon on the Mount, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5).

One of the cruelest notions that religion perpetuates is the notion that all sin is punished and all righteousness is rewarded. All throughout his ministry Jesus renounced that superstition. Once in Jerusalem the tower of Siloam fell and crushed a group of workers. Up and down the city of Jerusalem there was a rumor that these were the most wicked men in all of the city of Jerusalem. But Jesus renounced that. "Those eighteen," he said, "upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed, do you think that they were offenders above all the people that dwell in Jerusalem."

On another occasion the disciples of Jesus confronted him with a man born blind. "Who sinned?" they asked, "this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" (John 9:1ff.). Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

On yet another occasion Jesus told a parable about two men who built houses--one built on the sand, the other on the rock. But the rain came down on both of these houses. All things come alike to all.

And what about the death of Christ? Shall we trace his suffering to sin? What sin? He was holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinner--no; you cannot trace the punishment of Christ on the cross to sin.

The same is true in your life and in mine. Not everything bad that happens in life can be traced back to sin. In this sense there is a great impartiality to life. All things come alike to all.

## III.

But having said that, Paul's thought goes deeper. There are aspects of human existence where all things do not come alike to all. Ecclesiastes' thought was often pessimistic because he believed that death came alike to all. But death does not come alike to all.

George Washington and Benedict Arnold were contemporaries who died within a short period of time of each other. But they did not die in the same fashion. Benedict Arnold was a traitor to his country. He died in London. They say to his final day he kept the American uniform that he had worn at Saratoga, where he acquitted himself so wonderfully, and that in the closing hours of his life he took it out and held it in his hands. He died a renegade from the country that he loved and lived among a people that could never love a traitor.

As David McCullough points out in his book, 1776, George Washington was one of the most vilified Presidents in the history of our nation. And, yet, he was one of the most beloved as well. Each year thousands of Americans flock to Mt. Vernon to pay respect to the man who was called “The father of his country.”

Sometimes we refer to death as the “great equalizer” and so it is. Death comes to us all. But not all leave behind the same legacy. Jesus and Judas both died on the same day. Would you say that they left behind the same legacy? It would be one thing to be the mother of Jesus and to turn brokenhearted from the cross, yet able to thank God all your days that it was your honor to bear him. It would be far different to be the mother of Judas and to have to bear that burden for the rest of your life.

How would you like to be remembered? That is a question for young people to ponder. To be sure, we all die. But we are not remembered the same.

#### IV.

Then, finally, one comes to the real difference between the Apostle Paul and Ecclesiastes. Both agree that there is a great impartiality in life. Both agree that the same fate awaits us all. But Paul is willing to take one more step: “All things,” he writes, “work for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.” For Paul there is something more than victimization. He does not propose simply to suffer what life brings. He is able to find even in the worst circumstances, something that allows him to transmute the lead of life into gold.

Paul had a remarkable capacity to take a bad situation and make it into something good. Put him in a terrible situation--in prison with the Praetorian guard over him-- and he writes to his friends in Philippi, “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has been known through the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Philippians 1: 12-13). Put him in some difficult place and he knows that he can still do something about it.

The great composer Beethoven began to notice early in his career that he was starting to lose his hearing. At first he felt only despair. “What a sorrowful life I must now live,” he wrote; “How happy would I be if my hearing were completely restored...but as it is I must draw back from everything and the most beautiful years of my life will take wings without accomplishing all the promise of my talent and my powers.” Beethoven thought his life was over.

But listen to his biographer. “We are eternal debtors to his deafness. It is doubtful if such lofty music could have been created except as a self-compensation for some such affliction, and in the utter isolation which that affliction brought about.”

Paul found that true in his own life. It is clearly present in his own writings. His early letters to the church at Galatia and at Thessalonica are turning points in the history of the church. But in his final testaments one sees something present in Philippians and Romans a depth not before was not present.

You see all things happened to him--joy and sorrow, prosperity and failure, ill health and good health, love and hate. He was worshipped as a god and imprisoned as a felon. But he brought to them something else--a conviction that God was at work in his life to bring good to those that loved him.

St. Augustine in his magnificent work, The City of God, dealt with the problem of why bad things happen to so many good people. The occasion of his writing was the fall of the Roman Empire and the destruction, carnage, and rape that came with it. Augustine finally concluded that the difference between Christians and non-Christians was not in terms of what happened to them. Rather, the difference was in the response. Christians, he believed, had the opportunity to respond with faith, hope, and love.

George Matheson, a famous Scottish minister of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, came face to face with a great crisis in his life. As a young minister, he realized that he was about to go blind. Because of his impending blindness, the young mother with whom he was in love, refused to marry him. He wrote a letter to his Presbytery, asking that his ordination be set aside, but the Presbytery refused to do so. Later, Matheson recovered his faith and penned a hymn that described his experience:

“O love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.”