



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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An After Easter Meditation

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This writing was started in early October, 1991. Now it is early December. Because we tend to be so “seasonal” in our thinking, it may seem odd to write an after Easter meditation at this time of year. It might seem more appropriate for it to be right after Easter. As a matter of fact, the thoughts, and first notes, about this paper were written right after Easter as well. Actually, it really doesn’t make any difference when it is.

From early in my adult life, I have struggled with the meaning of the message of Easter as I have heard it from pulpits, and read it in religious writings. Most often the words, written or spoken with intensity and emphaticness, and sometimes with conviction, are, “He is risen. He is not here.” And the message goes on to point out that Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins, while his resurrection is his – God’s – our – victory over sin and death. Because of his death and resurrection, we are assured of our own immortal life. That is, we are, if we believe he died and rose again, thereby conquering death, and if we confess him as our personal Lord and Savior.

It appears that there was no doubt that the tomb in which the body of Jesus was placed was empty that resurrection morning. And it is evident that something happened to those people who had been closest to Jesus before his crucifixion when they discovered that the tomb was empty. Whatever it was that they understood and believed about the crucifixion and the resurrection changed their lives. They said and did things they were unwilling – even afraid – to do while he was still alive. Something happened to them. The message of Easter was a powerful and life-changing message for them.

What is that message? How can I know what it is?

I struggle to understand the meaning of the Easter message. It is easy to proclaim. The words are there for the proclaiming. But the meaning – what is the meaning? I’m not sure that I am all that clear, or accurate, or complete in my understanding when it comes to the meaning. Somehow, “He is risen.” and “He is not here.” in and of themselves do not say what the significance of the event really is. Neither do the reiterated statements, “By dying on the cross, he has saved you from your sins.” and, “By dying on the cross, he has saved you from your sins.” and, “By rising from the dead, he has conquered death for all who believe.” I don’t deny the statement, nor similar ones. I struggle with trying to understand what they mean.

So again this year – 1991 – during the Easter season, and after the Easter season, I struggled with my understanding of the meaning of the message of Easter. And, this time, I came to another point of view.

The other point of view centers in a new sense – or description – of the meaning of sin and death.

I want to focus particularly on the meaning of sin.

As I think we all know, while sin has many meanings the root meaning has to do

with separation from God. We identify many deeds as sins, or sinful. We usually label the things we do when we break any of the commandments as sinful. Indeed, it appears that most any activity that is not accepted and approved as right by whoever makes those determinations in our society is considered to be sinful. That means, of course, that what gets labeled as sinful, as well as not sinful, can vary a lot from time to time and culture to culture.

However, I find that identifying certain actions as sinful doesn't do a lot to facilitate my understanding of the meaning of sin or of death. Nor does it do very much toward clarifying the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, or resurrection in general, or of victory over death.

Remembering the root meaning of the word, sin, is separation – separation from God – does give me some handles. With that definition, any belief, thought, or action of mine that puts a barrier between me and God is sin. The outcome of sin is death – perhaps best understood as separation from God. The apostle Paul put it very succinctly when he wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 7:23) When I am separated from God by whatever means, I am in a state of sin, and the price I pay is death. I am dead to the relationship with God. When I am not separated from God, I am living the life that is God's free gift to me. I am alive. I have eternal life in Christ Jesus, my Lord. I have the same eternal life that Jesus has. Death did not conquer Jesus. Death does not conquer me.

When I think in terms of eternal life, and of conquering death, I find that I must be very careful. I must keep it clearly in mind that, when I believe, or think, or act in such a way as to cause me to be separated from God, I have sinned. I must also keep it clearly in mind that eternal does not mean immortal. Eternal has to do with being whole and complete, rather than to have escaped death. Jesus didn't escape death. He conquered death – whatever it is that death actually means.

So sin is that which separates me from God – makes me dead. What do I do, or think, or believe that separates me? What, more than anything else, serves to bring about that separation from death?

I suggest that my refusal to accept my mortality is that which, more than anything else, serves to bring about my separation from God.

My refusal to accept my mortality? If I accept my mortality, don't I accept the certainty of my death? Isn't death what I am trying to avoid? Didn't Jesus die so that I would not die? And the answer is, “Yes.” or “No.” according to what I believe about both life and death, and about Jesus.

I refuse to accept God's gift of my mortality?

The words in the second chapter of Genesis tell us that “God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man

became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) God created me a living being – a mortal being. Do I refuse to accept that I am mortal? Do I insist that I must live this life so as to achieve and/or earn immortality?

That human beings, mortals though we are, insist on trying to achieve immortality is one way to understand the temptation experience told in the third chapter of Genesis.

The man and the woman confronted the issue of their mortality. God had said, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Gen. 2:16-17) Could this mean spiritual death?

If I refuse to accept God’s gift of my mortality, then that must mean that I insist on having my immortality. Or maybe it means that God has given me my mortality, and that I have decided that my chief task in this life to figure out how to achieve, or to gain, immortality – with or without God’s help.

To express the task another way, I must cheat, or defeat, or deny death, since the inevitable end of mortality is death. If I succeed, I won’t die. I will be immortal. Mortal, immortal, and separation from God get all mixed up.

The message to the man and the woman in the Garden was, “Don’t eat of the fruit of the tree of all knowledge. If you do, you will die.” That is, you will choose to be separated from God.

The tempter said, “You won’t die. Separation from god won’t kill you. Instead, you will be like God, and will know all things.” The tempter might have said, “You won’t need relationship with God anymore.” You will have all knowledge, and all the resources you need to achieve immortality. You will defeat death.”

God said, after the man and the woman had eaten, “Since people have chosen to try to know all things, and so to have the resources (as they think) to achieve immortality, they have shut themselves off from the fruit of the tree of life. They have decided to forgo fellowship with God in this life.”

In other words, I suggest, immortality is not the objective of the life God has given me. Being mortal, and fully enjoying this mortal life in the company of God, is. It is not my task to try to achieve immortality by any means of which I can conceive. God has already given me my life. So my objective is not to try to gain my life (which I already have) but to live it fully in fellowship with God.

Since sin is living separated from God, it may be that my greatest sin – the most separating thing I can do – is to refuse to accept the life God has given me, which is my mortality. Maybe what the man and the woman did in the Garden was to refuse to accept their mortality, and to insist on immortality as something they were to achieve, and so to try to deny the reality that mortals die – that is, mortal life ends.

Maybe the man and the woman in the Garden were trying to achieve victory over mortal death in the belief that, thereby, they would gain immortality.

I can think of victory over death in two senses. One is to try to deny the reality of mortal death; to try to stave it off; to use every means to postpone it. The other is to accept mortal death as a normal part of the gift of life; to understand that this mortal life that God has given me ends. At some point, I die. Death is real. Death for a mortal is real. I do not need to fear it. Nor do I need to deny its reality. It is a part of this life.

Several years ago, I was watching an interview with Katherine Hepburn on the “Good Morning America” show on TV. As I recall, Ms. Hepburn, at one point, said, “With all due respect to all religions, I do not believe that this life is a preparation for death.” Nor, she might have said, preparation for life after this life.

I concur with Ms. Hepburn. This life is not a preparation for death – the death of our bodies – nor is it an arena in which to try to achieve immortality. It is, rather, an opportunity to experience the fullness and completeness of the life God gave us when God breathed into us the breath of life and made us mortals in God’s own image. I have achieved victory over death when I focus my attention on my mortality and make the very most of it that I can.

However, if I choose to try to live separated from God I experience both immediate and ultimate death. And this kind of death has little to do with either body death or body respiration. It does point up that to try to live this mortal life out of relationship with God is not to live at all. It is to be dead – spiritually dead. I really fear this kind of death.

I see life after death – life after this life – as a separate issue from the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. I don’t know what kind of life there is after our bodies die. Certainly, the belief that life continues after this life is very widespread – far beyond the teachings of Christianity. However, I know of no way to know about this with any certainty. I am content to leave the matter in the hands of God, and to turn my attention to my life here and now.

I believe that the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection has to do with what I believe about and decide to do with my life here and now – this God-given mortal life.

Yes, I read and hear the words that promise future salvation and eternal life through the risen Christ if I believe. It occurs to me that maybe salvation has to do with being saved from separation from God (my sin) in this present life, and that eternal life has to do with experiencing this present life in its fullness as God intended from the beginning.

Jesus never chose separation from God. He lived fully the life that I have the capacity to choose and live. It comes down to this – those who were threatened by Jesus’

way of life, and had the power to do it, brought about the death of his body. To their dismay, they discovered that they had not succeeded in killing Jesus – not the life he lived. His is the way of life, here and now, and I can choose it.

It is OK to be mortal – to live this life and come to the end of it.

A thought occurs to me. I can't live beyond this life if I haven't lived in this life. It is a dismaying thought – and a freeing one. It frees me to concentrate on how and why I live this life. It frees me to stop being anxious about living beyond this life.

I am. A plant is. An animal is. Life is. We each live to be who and what we are – the full cycle – with all the potential already and always there. We each are being ourselves, and, in a very real sense, we never stop being.

I am, and I must choose either to be or to deny my being and try to become.

Immortality, I suggest, is to try to keep this present identity – to try to preserve myself forever – as if it were actually possible.

Mortality, I suggest, is to live life to the hilt here and now as God has given it to me. And this is actually possible.

Jesus did this. He lived this mortal life that God had given him as God intended. He never tried to achieve immortality. Though he was sorely tempted, he chose to keep this point of view even though people could – and did – kill him because of it. Only they couldn't quite succeed.

Finally, on that resurrection morning, some people realized that this was true. So, with breathless awe and wonder, they proclaimed, "He is not here. He is risen. He is alive. We have seen him."

Finally, they had really seen him – alive in the fullness of his mortality.

When I truly believe this, and live it, I have conquered death for as long as I live. I have seen Jesus alive. I am raised with Christ to newness of life. What happens after this life is in the hands of God who loves me unconditionally. It is not my concern. Living here and now is.

This is my after Easter meditation in this year of our Lord, 1991.