

The Reverend Frank Haggard's
Easter Message to
Westminster Presbyterian Church
April 4, 2020

“DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY”

Psalm 30:4-12; I Corinthians 15:50-57

Wilmer Baker had been a life-long friend of my grand parents, having lived his entire 42 years in the little town of Gordon, Wisconsin, only about four miles from their cabin on Whitefish Lake. Wilmer was a full-blooded Ojibway Indian or Chippewo, as they were called by the early French traders and trappers, and he could tell you just about anything you wanted to know about Ojibway customs and their way of life. Then one morning the phone at our cabin rang. It was Wilmer's sister and her choked-up voice let us know she must have some bad news. Bad it was! Wilmer had died suddenly of a heart attack the day before. He was only 42 and looked like the picture of health – tall, brawny, agile, and not a gray hair or a wrinkle. My mother told Wilmer's sister how shocked and grieved we were and what a loss he would be to the entire community and to his tribe.

The next day we drove to Wilmer's house where he had lived with two of his sisters and several nieces and nephews; Wilmer had never married. As we got out of the car and started up the path to the house we were surprised to find the path covered with brush and twigs which had just been dragged over to disguise it. When we arrived at the front door it had been boarded over and the boards had been given a quick coat of paint so that they matched the color of the rest of the house. We were puzzled. What was going on? We then went around to the side door. It also was boarded up and recently painted. Every window had the shutters closed and latched. The place was deserted and had been made to appear as if no one lived there. Why we wondered?

From Wilmer's house we returned to the gas station and convenience store, which along with the tavern and post office are the only businesses in Gordon. My father asked our friend Jack who ran the station and store what had happened to Wilmer's sisters and their children. Had they moved away? Why was the house boarded up and made to look as if no one lived there? Jack knew the answer: "That's what the Ojibwan Indians do when someone in the family dies. They move out for a whole week and go to a neighbor's house or stay in a motel. They deliberately create the effect of a deserted house." "Why?", I was curious to know. Jack replied, "The Ojibway believes that the souls of the dead

are scared and lonely. For a week they cannot find their way to heaven, and even if they did find their way they couldn't get in. No Ojibway can enter heaven alone. He needs another dead soul to accompany him." "What does the soul do during this week?" I asked. "It tries to return to its family and loved ones," Jack continued. "Of course, it comes to where its family lives and tries to enter their home." "That's scary", I said. "What is even scarier is that this lost and lonely soul wants to take the soul of a living person with them so they won't be scared and lonely," Jack went on. "You mean that this soul might kill a living person?", I wondered. "Yes, they might," answered Jack. "Unless the family disguises their house to make it appear unoccupied and move away, the soul will try to get inside, and if he gets inside he could cause a fatal accident or make a person deathly ill." "Wow! I never heard of a dangerous soul before," I exclaimed. "It's hard to believe that Wilmer would ever hurt anyone." "I wouldn't believe it either," said Jack, "but the Ojibway claim that it's Gospel Truth."

The Ojibway are not unique or unusual because of their fear of the dead or the spirits and souls of the dead. At one time virtually all people regarded the dead as terrifying and dangerous, and they took great precautions to avoid unnecessary contact with them. Recall that in the Old Testament the dead are regarded as "unclean." "Unclean" does not mean unwashed dirty or covered with germs. It means "unholy" or offensive to God. A piece of port may be well-cooked and served in the best restaurant but an orthodox Jew regards such a tasty morsel as "unclean" because port is offensive to God and He forbids His chosen people to eat it. The dead or a dead body is also offensive to God and must be removed from the presence of living people as soon as possible. We read in the Book of Numbers: "Command the Israelites to put outside of their camp everyone . . . who is unclean through contact with a corpse." Furthermore, the Israelites would always whitewash the front of the caves or piles of stones they used for tombs and graves. This was a warning to the unsuspecting that dead bodies or their remains were in that spot, and the area should be avoided. At funerals the mourners would weep and wail loudly to scare away the soul of the dead person so that he wouldn't injure anyone still living. Also the family of the deceased would tear their garments and cover themselves with ashes. This would keep the departed soul from injuring the living, and a departed soul who had no envy would not haunt and harm those who were still alive.

The fundamental reason for the fear of death in ancient Israel is that death destroyed any relationship between the dead person and God. The dead were beyond God's care and concern and went to the underworld to a place called "Sheol: or the "Pit." There they had a bleak, listless, weak existence, regretting their separation from the living and unable to communicate with God. The Psalm writer laments: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will

the dust tell of your faithfulness? . . . The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.”

Jesus changes this grim and fearsome understanding of death and life-after-death. Through His life, crucifixion, and resurrection Jesus conquered death. St. Paul rejoiced: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? . . . Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” How did Jesus perform this greatest of all victories? First, Jesus showed us that death was not simply physical extinction. Physical extinction or death is a symptom of spiritual death which precedes our physical demise. Spiritual death occurs when we do not at all times make God first and foremost in our lives, when we put ourselves first and live primarily for ourselves and our own pleasure and ambition. We all die spiritually when we become self-centered rather than God-centered, and this spiritual death occurs or almost occurs at birth. Our entire lives from birth until death are much more self-centered than God-centered. God will permit no one to live forever physically when they have ceased to put Him first. Second, Jesus Himself lived a life much different from ours: He always at all times put God first and was absolutely and completely God-centered. Because Jesus lived a perfectly God-centered life He destroyed death in the spiritual sense, and once death is conquered spiritually we have hope for a new physical life after our self-centered lives come to an end. Yes, our physical lives will die and end because of our self-centeredness and our making ourselves more important than God is. But if we strive to live as Jesus lived, to put God at the center of our lives and to delight in His presence and in doing His will, we have the hope of a new resurrected physical life at the end of this world. Jesus rose from the dead on Easter because He was totally spiritually alive; He never once thought of Himself as more important than God and put His will ahead of God’s. That was His victory and the only way to conquer death. Unless spiritual death is destroyed there can be no hope for a physical life with no threat of death. As Paul wrote [Because of Jesus] “death has been swallowed up in victory!” That victory can be yours as well if you too will strive to free yourself from spiritual death and spend the rest of your life sharing in the great victory Jesus has won for us.