

## INTERIM VICTORY

WHAT ARE YOU SO HAPPY ABOUT? People sing and dance and carry on like we won the war or something. I was ten years old when we won the last war – or thought we had. It was a war that was going to end all wars and bring prosperity and peace to the world. And that is how we celebrated. But it turned out it was not over, and we have been fighting – in ever so many places and in ever so many ways – but never really winning, ever since. So I made up a new theory about a broken, imperfect, temporal world where true “peace and love and prosperity” could never exist. Then I read a story about getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24), and I knew it was not just a theory. After a while I came to realize that Jesus knew this more clearly and deeply than any of us. It is why He came. And He designed a whole New WAY for us that has nothing to do with success or winning in the outer world. He taught and demonstrated and showed us in endless ways, but most of us barely catch on in one short lifetime. Here is just one tiny summation hint: *“In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33)

I hate to pour cold water on your jubilation, but the way we have come to celebrate Easter in our time has all the earmarks of a premature victory celebration. WHAT ARE YOU SO HAPPY ABOUT? I understand that Jesus has risen from the dead. But does that mean the war is over? Or does it mean He has come back to lead us into battle in a whole different WAY and on a whole different plane?

Keep celebrating and rejoicing! Jesus back *with us* on any basis is certainly reason for celebration. But much as I love Easter, when I step back to look and listen to it, I frequently get the feeling that people have it all separated off from real life – at least separated off from any real changes or new directions in their own lives. This has something to do with an afterlife, maybe. Isn't that sweet? “Hey Jesus, you're the best! Hey God, you're incredible! We can hardly wait to join you in Heaven. Just don't bother us in the here and now. Just don't ask us to live for Your Kingdom or to build Your church in the here and now. See you later! Thanks for everything.”

I am only inquiring about the nature of the celebration. I understand we are talking about *spiritual* warfare – not that we can really separate the spiritual from the physical, mental, relational, or personal. Nevertheless, premature-victory marches make me nervous.

Indeed I do feel like celebrating on Easter. But there is a big difference between a celebration that is putting away all the weapons and getting ready to go home, and a celebration that is polishing up the weapons, getting all the gear repacked, and getting ready to go back into battle.

More and more our culture is getting this Easter thing all out of context. We have people celebrating Easter who have not even heard of the war, never mind participating in it personally. They want to go home to love and light but have no notion about what that costs or requires. God built this place so we could experience the warfare – know the battle between light and darkness, and know the difference between worshipping God and worshipping our own desires and notions – so that when we get “home,” we will not instantly destroy things there like we do here. Easter is a charade, unless it is sending us back into battle – only this time into spiritual warfare. We always want to sidetrack ourselves with saving the world on the outside: our only thought should be for others. That way Jesus won’t have a chance to do any real work on *us*. Jesus saves, but mostly we think that means “others” – who really need it. And we don’t mind being Jesus’ heroes, helping to save others – at least a little bit, in our spare time. But we do not want to be the sinners He is saving – overhauling, rebirthing, creating new – especially not if that’s going to change the way we live, what we live for, and how we are going to spend our time and our resources.

Oh yes, the world (with ample help from Satan) has Easter all tamed-down and civilized, nicely displayed in a golden frame with lilies and bunnies. And have you noticed how Easter is always portrayed in pastel shades? We put it in a gilded cage so it cannot break out on us – cannot make any real difference in our lives – at least not yet. Maybe after we die, it would be okay. You can’t take it with you, so maybe it would be okay then. Happy Easter ... tra la la.

There are people everywhere who do not even know that there has been a war, never mind that it is still going on. Oh, they know about the Middle East, political campaigns, and some of the truly devastating issues of our time. But they do not know that these are only symptoms of the true war, the real rebellion. They do not connect such things with the real war going on between our world and its Creator. They do not want to know or see that everybody fights on one side or the other in this war, whether they realize it or not. And certainly most of them do not know very much about the Enemy General. They think the thing about an ADVERSARY is just a myth for religious nuts and

fanatics, even though we all endlessly succumb to his lies and temptations. And then we wonder why our lives are so full of fear, loneliness, guilt, and despair. And we wonder why we keep hurting each other.

Easter is laced with happy noises and a lot of wild statements, but in many places and for many people it has very little to do with Jesus or His Kingdom. It is more on the level of “I love a parade.” If that is all some people want, that is their choice. If they think they are happy, it is fine with me. But that is not the Easter I celebrate. And if I really *care* about you, that is not the Easter I hope *you* are celebrating either.

WHAT ARE WE SO HAPPY ABOUT? Can we still lose this war? Despite Satan’s enormous defeat at the Battle of Good Friday, can Satan still win? We do not see how. Take death away – or more accurately, accepting our death and moving beyond it – and Satan’s greatest weapon is gone. Obviously he is badly crippled, at least with people who truly believe in Easter. Indeed there *is* reason for celebration. We do not see how Satan can win in the end. Not anymore. But death was never Satan’s *only* weapon. We know of at least seven others that are particularly lethal. The argument today is whether we should add starvation, pollution, and overpopulation to the list, or whether they are in fact by-products of the original seven. In any case, whatever kind of victory we are celebrating, people are still getting creamed all over the planet. Reverence and respect for life, justice, love, and holiness are not increasing by leaps and bounds upon the earth.

So we still have a little problem with our celebration, don’t we? What about the two thousand years of warfare here on earth since that first Easter? Christ has risen from the dead, but the world does not seem to be catching on all that quickly. The warfare continues, and it has certainly been more than minor skirmishes. There has been incredible heroism; the legions of the Christ have not been pansies. But they have not been any paragon of coordinated light and love and truth either. Sometimes they fight on the wrong side. Sometimes they fight with the wrong weapons. Sometimes they stop to enjoy the plunder and forget all about the battle. And they keep having all these children, many of whom they never bother to teach about the real battle, the truth, the light, or the Savior. Then when the children run into the real battle, they are caught without training or discipline and frequently get creamed, even by lightweight units of the opposition.

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Reading, writing, and arithmetic – even being good at sports and having a Ph.D. – are no help in the real war: the fight of this world against its Creator.

Easter has all the earmarks of a premature celebration. At best it is an Interim Victory. If you celebrate while polishing the weapons, reorganizing your gear, and getting ready to go back into battle – well and good. Then it is indeed a great celebration. Otherwise I like Palm Sunday better than this premature victory. If Easter means it is all over, then I want to know why we have slums worldwide. Why is every system on earth screaming “overload”? Why are there individuals everywhere so bereft, bankrupt, hopeless, lost, hurt? And it is not just a few on the fringe of an otherwise lovely life. It is millions. All of us – well, at least most of us – wish we could do more. We wish we could stop the pain and mayhem. But we misjudge the depth of the problem and we underestimate the Enemy. IT TAKES A SAVIOR. It has to change from the inside. And yes, that includes *the Savior* changing us from the inside. That does not happen in one emotional moment and then we are “fixed” for good. It takes a lifetime of prayer, following, devotion, and worship. Then, about the time most of us start to catch on, we are old and out of here.

Then it is time for the next generation to experience and learn and to open their lives to the Savior. That is what this world is here for. It is not designed so we can fix it. It is designed so we can begin to learn some of the basic principles of LIFE and LOVE. It is designed in free will so that we cannot have or know anything until we choose it ourselves – truly and deeply – with such conviction that we will not allow *anything or anyone* to steal it back away from us. Knowing and understanding such things will be even more essential in the next realm. Why? Because we are told that free will and opportunity and possibility are greatly expanded in the next realm. If self-centeredness and rebellion against God cause problems here – so much so that they are constantly tearing our whole world apart – imagine the horror of misused gifts and unchanneled willfulness THERE!

I do not believe in the Hell of some burning Lake of Fire, though I certainly do believe in the Hell of remorse. And I cannot comprehend how anybody survives here for very long without the grace and forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. But if you think God is going to let us into the higher realms of Heaven before we are ready – so we can mess things up there like we do here – you must think God is awfully stupid.

Our spiritual warfare is more real than any other conflict we will ever experience. The stakes are high and we have a very great deal to learn, and much of it we cannot learn without the Savior's presence to guide and redeem us. I am not much worried about getting thrown into the Lake of Fire. I *am* worried about staying in the one I am already in for years longer than necessary just because I am too stubborn and rebellious to let God change me and save me from the level I am stuck in even at this moment.

You probably have no idea what I'm talking about. But I have noticed for quite some time now that I get stuck on a certain level of life and awareness. My mother used to say I was "going through a phase." Yes, well, however you want to say it. And by the way, she was going through her phases too. Anyway, things get hard and I start having the same experience over and over, in different guises – going around and around in a circle that gets more and more hopeless and dissatisfying. I never think it's my fault, at first. It's the people around me, or the circumstances, or being caught in an unfair world. All of this, by the way, is true. But *knowing* it does not help to get me unstuck. So I go around and around until my soul wakes up and I cry to Jesus for help. Then He takes the blinders from my eyes and gives me power and wisdom I did not know existed, or at least did not know how to apply in my particular circumstances. So in grace (our world would say "like magic"), I am lifted out of that dead-spot and put onto a new level of opportunity, growth, and challenge. It is absolutely wonderful, for a while. But then I start to circle again, even on this new level. The same pattern starts forming and I experience the same thing again – over and over, in different guises. I realize I am stuck again. While there may be no physical flames, it does get more and more uncomfortable and more and more discouraging. I blame everything and everyone around me more and more. And it does about as much good as it did the last time.

Last time, I got out of the dead-spot by crying to Jesus for help. So naturally this time, as soon as I recognize the same patterns developing, of course I will cry to Jesus again – with true willingness and eagerness to have Him come and help me. NOT ON YOUR LIFE! This time I am going to figure it out all by myself. I have already learned so much, already gotten so spiritual and holy, already read the Bible enough and prayed enough. This time I will do it *my* way. This time I realize I do not really need a Savior. Nuts to Easter. Forget the Spirit. I am in charge of my own life, thank you very much! So I get to go around and around for quite a long time. Or, in biblical

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language, I get to stay in Hell for a long time. And while it may not be for all eternity, it certainly seems like it. Meanwhile I am waiting for everything and everyone around me to change, so that my life will get better. Or, in traditional language, I am waiting to go to Heaven – waiting for the Second Coming. Isn't that what Easter is really all about? If I just wait long enough, I do not have to grow or change. I can just stay the way I am and eventually – because he loves me – God will whisk me off to Heaven.

Of course, the real truth is just the reverse. If God really loves me, he will play no such meaningless, cheap-shot games with me. He will not send me to new places, no matter how wonderful, until I am ready to appreciate them and until I have some chance to truly experience and grow in them. I do not know how many “holding pens” God has beyond this earth. I do know there sure are a lot of them here. I have stayed in a lot of them a lot longer than any intelligent, spiritually awakened person could possibly explain. The only thing is, when Jesus does finally free me – meaning, when I finally let Him – it is impossible not to be incredibly grateful.

WHAT ARE WE SO HAPPY ABOUT? I do not mean to pour water on our celebrations, but if we think Easter means it's all over, we have a very weird definition of God's mercy and love. If that's the deal, who needs forgiveness? Oh my friends, the battle may be won, but the war is not over! Maybe the war cannot be lost, but we can certainly lose our part of it. Maybe Satan cannot win the war, but he can still win us. And on a less serious note than that, perhaps, it still matters to me that Satan can go right on defeating us in skirmish after skirmish.

Easter is an Interim Victory. I hope you are truly joyful today. I am too. It's hard to be too sad with Jesus alive and back with us. But I suggest you celebrate as warriors getting ready for the fray. Have you noticed that all the early disciples believed in Easter, but they were not getting out of the battle? Jesus did not come in the first place to organize a picnic. He did not come back on Easter just to decorate the eggs. HE IS STILL MESSIAH, you know. He is Son of *David*, and David was very possibly the greatest warrior who ever lived. The Messiah's function is to overthrow the world as we know it – to lead us into battle, to usher in a new age. Jesus is still Messiah! Throw in Easter, Christmas, Good Friday, Pentecost, Maundy Thursday, Labor Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the kitchen sink – throw in anything and everything we like – but He is still MESSIAH: *CHRISTOS*. Just because Jesus doesn't do it like we expect or with the weapons

or methods we expect does not mean the war is called off. I suggest we celebrate as warriors getting ready for the fray.

So Easter is a great victory, but it is an Interim Victory. We get Jesus back. For the interim, we receive the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – not because it is over, but because *without Him* we cannot go on. God with us where we are *now*; us with God, in his truer realms, *later*.

It seems to me that we are both appalled and deeply comforted by the truth. We have these marvelous twin passages: *“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33) If that is not an Easter proclamation, I have never heard one. But that is not all, though many do not want to hear it: *“Every child of God overcomes the world. Who is the victor over the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”* (I John 5:4-5)

Oh yes! He leads the WAY. He goes first. But what about our following? It is not enough for *Him* to overcome the world. *We* must also! We do so by trusting and believing in Him to the point where the world cannot control us any more than it could control Him. We belong to Him – to a different King, and to a different Kingdom.

People who follow Jesus *and love Him* come to love not only Jesus but what He lives for (God’s Kingdom) and whom He serves (God). Sentiment and emotion may come forth, from time to time, toward those who please us and do things for us, but that alone does not transform life. Love flows out of things far deeper than that. Jesus challenges people and calls them into their own true identity and destiny. Those who do not oppose or leave Him (though many do) turn – repent – until by and in His power and presence they also find lives of DEVOTION, DEDICATION, COMMITMENT, OBEDIENCE ... *to God*. And contrary to all expectations and assumptions, this is the very WAY in which we find happiness, fulfillment, joy, hope, and genuine love, even in *this* world.

Easter is an Interim Victory. The mandate stands. Jesus is still Messiah. None of it is based on our prowess or inherent divinity. The present pain and alienation continue. Neither the world’s good sense nor our mighty acts are going to save anything. The mandate is to go on loving each other and to go on inviting others into the fellowship and into the Kingdom, regardless of whatever mayhem

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is going on here. Nevertheless, we are never left out of the equation. This appalls us – and brings us joy.

Easter is an Interim Victory and an interim celebration. I hope we are all celebrating like warriors getting ready for the fray.

### PRAYER

Well, Lord, You told us long ago, and from the beginning: if we wanted to follow You, we would have to take up our own cross – our own death – in order to do so.

It has taken us a long time to understand that. Much of the time we have not wanted to understand that. At first we tried to fill our lives so full of every kind of activity and noise imaginable – to try to keep from understanding that.

But now, if we have finally understood and accepted the Cross – and our death to this world – now you return to us with an even bigger mandate. If, seeing Your death, we have to accept our own – then seeing Your Resurrection, we have to accept our own.

Now, to follow You, we must take up our LIFE – our redeemed and grace-given LIFE – and not in some far distant time or realm, but here, and now!

O Lord, save us from our fear of Your compliments and promises. They are even more terrifying than the shame and death You went through to reach us. But we love You! You are to us everything beautiful and true and whole – everything that draws us and lifts us and haunts us – filling us with hope and an unearthly peace – and making everything we know here worth going through.

Holy Jesus, Savior and Lord, work Your WAY and WILL with us, we pray. Make our lives about a Cross. Make our lives about a Resurrection.

In Your power and love – both in what we see and in the mystery beyond our seeing – we pray it now together, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*