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THE CURSE OF THE COYOTE
1 Corinthians 15:55-57

Lots of people dream of writing a book that becomes a best-seller. Recently I read something from one such person who actually is a good writer. He has been observing what kinds of books are selling these days. He noted that, of all things, Amish romance books are doing very well. He thought maybe he could weave that with some other popular themes and write a hit. Here is what he came up with.

Cassidy: Amish Vampiress of the Tribulation. He says, “That’s right. It’s an Amish novel; it’s a vampire novel; it’s an end times novel. It’s the best of all worlds.” Here’s what he envisions as the text on the back cover. “Twenty-three year old Cassidy lives a simple life in the Amish countryside of Lancaster County. Simple, that is, until Slade Byler moves into the old Lapp farm. Cassidy finds herself irresistibly drawn to the handsome Slade; but she fears to share the secret that she alone knows. For Cassidy is an immortal, a princess in the long line of ancient Amish vampires. Will Slade’s love grow cold when he learns this secret? Can Cassidy give him a heart that does not beat? Meanwhile, the strength of the Antichrist grows as he consolidates his power and seeks to destroy the peace loving people of Pennsylvania. A blossoming romance unfolds between Cassidy and Slade as the world around them changes forever. They must fight to stay alive, they must fight to keep their forbidden love a secret, but, as Amish, they must not fight at all. In this irresistible tale of intrigue, romance and adventure, set against global upheaval, the bonnet meets the cape in a story sure to span the ages.”

Why didn’t I think of that? I guess I didn’t think of it because it’s silly. It won’t make a good story. We all have favorite stories. But today I want you to think about a different kind of story. We are going to think about the story of our own lives, both what that story is, and what it could be. We are going to look at words from an ancient letter from Paul, the apostle, to some confused people in the Greek city of Corinth to get some insight on our own story.

WHAT IS YOUR STORY?

Even those who don’t like public speaking still like to talk about themselves at some level. All of us have a story to tell and long for someone to care about it. The Bible says that your story is significant. I would like you to think this morning about what your story is. If I asked you to tell us your story what would you say?

To be compelling a story must have a conflict. It must have a hero who is on a quest to attain something. There must be some good that he seeks to achieve and there must be obstacles or opponents he must defeat. According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences last year's best movie was *Argo*. I didn't see a lot of movies last year but of the few I did see I'd agree it was the best. The central character, the hero, in that movie is CIA operative Tony Mendez. The good he pursues is to rescue 6 American diplomats who were hiding in Iran hoping to avoid being captured and imprisoned. He must overcome the opposition of the radical Islamist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini.

That's the kind of theme you see in every gripping tale. In *The Hunger Games* Katniss must overcome both her opponents in the games and the frightening authorities in order to obtain the good which is to be restored to her family. In *Happy Gilmore* the hero, Happy, wants to save his grandmother's house. She's about to lose it because she owes \$270,000 in taxes. In order to win the money Happy turns to golf and must overcome arrogant golf champion Shooter McGavin. See, even dumb stories have a hero facing conflict to win the day.

Your life has a story. Maybe you've never put it in those terms, but you've always known it. You've felt the conflict. There is some good that you are pursuing. You may have only a vague idea of what that good is, but you've been pursuing it. And your whole life there has been opposition to achieving that good. You may even have puzzled over where this opposition has come from, but you've felt it, you've known it is there and you've been frustrated by it.

What is that good that you are pursuing? What is the object of your life, the thing that drives it? And what keeps you from it? People identify a lot of different things that they are pursuing in life. It might be a successful career, financial security, fame, approval, good health, a happy marriage or happy family, peace, simply to feel happy, or some combination of those things.

The quest changes as we go through life. When you were a child it might have been some toy that you obsessed over like Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*. All that mattered to him, the ultimate good that determined whether life was worth living, was getting that Red Ryder BB gun. As you got older maybe it was a starting position on the high school team, or a date with that popular person, or maybe even to be named homecoming king or queen. As life went on it probably changed to something more substantial. Even now though you may find that the great good you pursue seems to be a moving target.

In the end what we are all pursuing is to have some version of the “good life.” We want to be at peace and satisfied. We want to have sufficient resources to make life bearable, we want to have someone who will love us and share life with us, we want to feel like our life matters. We want to be satisfied with what we feel and what we do. We are all pursuing that. We may disagree about the formula for it, and we may find that as we go along the formula must be adjusted, but we all want that. And we are all experiencing opposition. Something or someone is trying to block us from obtaining that goal.

WHAT IS THE HUMAN STORY?

The entire race is on a quest as well. We have a sort of collective quest, a fight we are all fighting. That fight has an individual component that reverberates out into a collective endeavor. If we can find that good life, that peace and fulfillment, what that should produce as a race is peace, harmony and goodness. It would be a world ruled by love. The entire human race longs for that. That’s why we have so many utopian dreams and schemes. We want peace for all at last, a world where people actually love each other, where everyone feels validated, affirmed and joyful.

Author and pastor Bryan Wilkerson took his family to a themed restaurant. The restaurant had big TV’s on the walls playing various cartoons. While most of his family was interacting their youngest, at the time maybe 4 years old, had his eyes glued to a television that was continuously showing Road Runner cartoons. He watched intently as Wile E. Coyote strapped rockets onto his back while he was on roller skates, shot himself out of a cannon, launched himself with a giant slingshot and tried various other fantastic schemes to catch up to the road runner. After watching for a long time Wilkerson’s son had an epiphany. Without taking his eyes off the screen he announced to the family, “No matter what he does, he’s never going to get the chicken.”

That cartoon tells the story of the human race. Wile E. Coyote is us. We’re never going to get the chicken. We try all manner of fantastic schemes to get that good thing we want, but we always fall short. People commonly lack peace. And the race as a whole certainly cannot find it. Our race is characterized by restlessness, anxiety, fear, frustration, doubt, and above all, conflict. We can’t live in peace with each other, and individually we lack the internal peace we long for. So many things have been tried to solve these problems, but they seem intractable. They’re still with us after so many centuries.

Laurie’s phone died a couple of weeks ago. She and I both have dumb phones. We had about the lowest end phones you can buy. We went to the phone company

store to get a replacement. The clerk told us we would have to buy a new one but for about the same price as the new dodo phone Laurie could get an I-phone. So she got one. This thing is astounding. 15 or 20 years ago it would have seemed like something out of science fiction. With this phone she has access to a world of information, she can actually deposit checks in a bank remotely, use it as a boarding pass for an airline flight, take pictures, make purchases and much more. That is just one example of how technology has made phenomenal advances. But here's the problem: we still can't get the chicken. Something always frustrates us and keeps us from the good things we desire. Human beings still cannot get along with each other. Everywhere you look in the world you see conflict. We were talking to a neighbor. We have very good neighbors, but in the course of the conversation it came out that this particular neighbor has a real problem with another neighbor who lives very close by. People can't get along.

I saw small story in the newspaper that expresses it well. Ron Artest, an NBA basketball player, two years ago changed his name to Metta World Peace. He plays for the Lakers and recently was injured. He had surgery on his knee this week. The small article about it had the headline, "Coach loses hope for World Peace." Yeah, me too, but in an entirely different way. Friday night we said goodbye to our terrific son-in-law, Michael. Early the next morning he boarded a plane to fly to Afghanistan as part of the war effort. It grieves us that he's going in harm's way. Why can't we get along?

What is our problem? Why can we never seem to capture the chicken? Why are we like an entire race of Wile E. Coyotes? In 1 Corinthians 15:56 Paul wrote of 3 concepts that explain our futility. Those elements are death, sin and law. Survey a number of people and ask them what the greatest problems of the human race are. Not 1 in 100 will say death, sin and law. What does Paul mean and is it really true?

Death is obvious. How can we ever be truly free and at peace with death continually threatening us? Its dark cloud hangs over us. Just consider the chilling words, "it's cancer," and you will quickly get in touch with how death saps us of freedom, joy and peace. Here is what Woody Allen said about death. "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror and renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless." He said that death is terrifying, that it haunts us at all times and mocks all we do.

This year 56,600,000 human beings will die. That means today alone 155,000 people will die. We will meet this morning for a little more than an hour. In just

one hour 6,500 people will die. It is a constant drumbeat and a constant threat to us that we cannot escape. I read recently that researchers in Korea have discovered that feeding worms cinnamon and ginseng prolongs their lives. So guess what is going to happen if word of this gets out? People are going to rush out and buy cinnamon and ginseng so they can prolong their lives.

We get that about death. How could you not? But what's the deal with sin? How is it the sting of death? Think of the sting of a sting ray down at the beach. What is it that inflicts the pain? It is the poison that the stinger of the ray injects into the system. Paul says sin is the poison that brings death into our system. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians Dr. Gordon Fee wrote (p. 806), "death is not simply the result of decay through normal human processes. Rather, it is the result of the deadly poison, sin itself."

What the Bible calls sin is the thing that inflicts death on us. But what is sin? That's a religious word not often used in our culture anymore. It means any and every variation, ever deviation from absolute perfect good. If it is not good, then by definition it is bad or evil. Sin, this evil, is like a force, a bent in our nature that affects every single one of us. Sin is the poison that causes death, but it also inflicts more than physical death on us. Sin also inflicts spiritual death on us. Spiritual death is our condition of being ever unable to reach the goal of the good life we all desire because of our own failings.

I will quote Bryan Wilkerson again. He said, "Sin is our human tendency to mess things up, to think of ourselves first instead of others, to hold a grudge instead of forgiving someone, to settle for lust instead of intimacy, to twist the truth, to lose our temper, to break our promises, to hurt the people we love. Sometimes it's our own sin that gets in the way; sometimes it's someone else's. Either way, it's always there, spoiling our joy and sabotaging our good intentions. As long as sin is on the loose in the world, in the human heart, we'll never live the lives we were meant to live."

Is sin really the problem? On Friday this week Michael McCarthy, an editor for the left leaning British newspaper *The Independent* wrote an editorial in which he reflected on the nature of humanity. He has always believed the standard liberal secular humanist doctrine that man is basically good. But Friday he said he has had to admit he was wrong. He wrote of the Christian idea that humans are fallen and sinful, "the idea of fallen man gives potent expression to that prominent part of the human character which has been observed down the ages with horror: our terrible potential for destruction, for causing suffering to others... Humankind is not

basically benign...People are not good.” He admits, we have sin within us, and that sin is the source of our troubles.

The law Paul referred to is the standard of what is right and good. The law calls us to be what we should be, and somehow we never can reach it, so we end up being condemned by that standard. So the law brings guilt to the equation for us and pronounces the death sentence on us.

That’s the human story. No matter how many peace treaties we sign we never stop fighting wars. No matter how often we tell ourselves we are going to do better we end up falling short of what we should be. No matter how many promises we make our own sin continues to wreak havoc on our own lives, relationships and other people. It is death, sin and the law that combine to keep us from the good we long for and never seem able to attain.

WHAT HOPE DO WE HAVE?

In verse 57 Paul wrote “thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” He claims there is victory over sin, death and the law through Jesus Christ. The answer is in the story of Jesus. Jesus is the hero of all of history because he had the greatest goal, but he faced a terrible battle to gain it. What was the good thing he sought? He his purpose in John 10:10 when he said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” In other places he said not only did he want us to have full life, but that he wanted it to be eternal. John 3:16 says the life he came to bring us is eternal.

This is crucial because as difficult as this life can be, the law condemns our sin and says we deserve worse than we have no forever! I don’t know if you saw the story but this week a man named Jose Martinez was awarded \$8000 from Disneyland. He is disabled. He was on the Small World ride when it broke down. He had to endure sitting on that ride listening to that song play for 3 hours. Sounds like hell to me. But the eternal punishment that awaits us is far us. Except Jesus came to give us life, a full life right now and a life that is good eternally.

But as with any hero and any good story there was a conflict. What did Jesus have to overcome to gain that life for us? He had to defeat the things that have defeated us, death, sin and the law. You know the story of Jesus. He was a seemingly insignificant peasant who suddenly burst on the scene in first century Israel preaching a message of hope to hopeless people. He said things like no one they had ever heard. He lived with courage and integrity and goodness, a life beyond reproach. And he backed up his words with miraculous power.

But his message was a threat to the religious authorities of his day. In the end they concluded the only way to silence him was to kill him. He died on that cross, and in so doing he took upon himself the guilt and punishment of all the wrong, all the weakness, all the ugliness, all the sin of every one of us for all time. He removed the power of the law. Its condemnation was spent on him instead of us. He saved us from the curse of the law.

He also broke the power of sin, of its ability to confine us forever to a life of futility and frustration. His life and death, he claimed, would be the thing that would bring about a transformation in the human heart. He would give us a new heart, put a new spirit in us that is a spirit of joy, freedom, love, goodness and hope so that we might live as we've always longed to.

But does he really have that power? The answer to that question is tied to the question of that last factor that he had to overcome. That factor was death itself. He claimed that he was God in the flesh, thus has the power to transform our hearts. But the final proof of that claim would be that he would defeat death. He would not stay dead, which would not only prove that he has the power to defeat the power of sin in our lives but also give us the victory over death Paul wrote about.

Nice story. A man rising from the dead. Yeah that happened with Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. He was killed by the Balrog in the mines of Moria and it was tragic. But then he showed up later in the story to help defeat the enemy of all Middle Earth, Sauron. It was a cool and hopeful story, but we all know it wasn't real. It was just a part of a story written for J. R. R. Tolkien's kids. It's the same with Jesus, right?

Wrong. The Bible doesn't present the story of Jesus as myth or legend. It claims it is history, including his resurrection from death. But can we believe this is true? Can we believe a man conquered death? J. Warner Wallace is a homicide detective from Los Angeles County whose presentations in courtrooms have revolutionized how trials are conducted across the country. He has appeared on national TV news shows. He currently specializes in cold case homicides. He also was a militant, outspoken atheist who mocked Christians and their faith. He described himself as a skeptic who "dissected Christians and the Christian worldview." At the age of 35 Wallace was challenged to use his investigative techniques and skills to evaluate the claims of the Bible that Jesus rose from the dead. He says, "there are many similarities between investigating cold cases and investigating the claims of Christianity."

Wallace was a skeptic, but when he applied his investigative abilities to the story of Jesus he could not avoid the conclusion that it was all true, that Jesus, did, in fact, rise from the dead and show himself to be the Son of God as he claimed. That's what the evidence showed. Wallace has written a book entitled *Cold Case Christianity* in which he presents the evidence in a clear and convincing way.

Can this really be true? Had Jesus not risen from the dead there would be no Christian movement, and there most certainly not have been a Paul writing 1 Corinthians. In April 2002 highly respected Oxford philosophy professor, Richard Swineburne made a presentation for philosophy professors at Yale University. In it he applied the Bayes Theorem, a widely accepted axiom of probability, to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By applying that theorem he reached the conclusion that the probability that Jesus rose from the dead was 97%.

Dr. Thomas Arnold, eminent historian at Oxford University and author of *The History of Rome* said, "I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, than...that Christ died and rose again from the dead."

IMPLICATIONS

I read a true story told by a man who is in the U.S. Air Force. He was on the crew of a plane that made a stop at Thule Air Force Base in Greenland on its way back to the US. The aircraft commander was anxious to take off as soon as the refueling was complete but there was a delay because they had to pump out the sewage tank and the truck that served that purpose got there late. When it arrived the airman doing the work didn't seem to be moving very fast. The commander berated the airman and threatened to punish him. The young airman calmly replied, "Sir, I have no stripes. I'm in Greenland. It's 20 degrees below 0 and I'm pumping sewage out of a plane. What do you think you're going to do to punish me?"

I fear there are many people who are in the "Life is hard, then you die" camp. Yes, life is frustrating and futile. What are you going to punish us with, death? That is not how God wants us to live. Jesus came here to obtain something for you and me. He wanted us to have life to the full. Can he really give it to us?

Brian Welch was a founding member and lead guitarist of the heavy metal rock band Korn. Their music consistently had messages that were dark, sexually explicit and disturbing. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* called them perverts and

psychopaths. These were not real uplifting fellows. Yet they have had multiple platinum albums. As a member of the band Welch had all the fame and money he ever dreamed of, and all the pleasures and perks that went with it. Yet he said he was depressed. The more famous and wealthy they became the worse it got. He was failing to get the chicken. A few years ago he left the band. The reason, he said, was that he had chosen Jesus Christ as his Savior, and now puts his hope in the Risen Lord. Three years later, walking in faith in Christ he said, "I'm the happiest man in the world." Jesus has the power to transform life!

If you never have put your faith in Jesus I encourage you to take one of two steps. Either accept the historical truth that he conquered death and thus was who he claimed, God in human form, or investigate the evidence for his claims. Put your faith in him, give him your heart and life and let him transform you and give you eternal life. Should you choose not to do that today, do what J. Warner Wallace did. Investigate the claims of Jesus. Read Wallace's book. Or read Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*. Find out whether this is true.

If you have put your faith in Jesus I want to encourage you to live in the resurrection power of Jesus, the transforming power of Christ. He has resurrection power to sustain you no matter what you face. Believe that and ask him to work in your life. Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." In Ephesians 1:19-20 Paul prayed that we would know God's "incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."

Think of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. It's a pretty good bet that after that he was different. What would he fear? I had a friend named Jeff my freshman year in college. He didn't believe in studying for tests, so, to no one's surprise, he wasn't back at school the next year. He was in the Marines, who eventually sent him to Viet Nam. He survived, and my senior year Jeff came back to school. He was a much better student, but he was also much less intimidated by authority or anything else. When he was told by someone that he might face consequences for something he would say, "What are they going to do, shave my head and send me to Nam?" That was off the board for him, so he didn't fear much.

The worst is off the board for those in Christ. Like Lazarus we now no longer need to fear, and we can know that Christ is always with us and he has the power to get us through whatever we face. So we can be at peace. We can have joy. We can rely

upon him to get us through. Hebrews 13:20-21 says “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will.”

Jesus is with us today 2000 years after he walked this earth because he conquered death and is still alive. He is still here. If we can grasp the nature of the spiritual realm, which is essentially another dimension, we will realize he is right here in this room with us right now. He goes with you wherever you go, whatever you face. I hated to send off our son-in-law, Michael to a war zone, but it helps me to know that he’s not going alone. Jesus is with him. And Jesus, the verse says, will equip us. We have joy and optimism because Jesus is alive! He is with us, will give us life eternal and will strengthen us as we trust in him.