

Dear Brothers, Stand Firm! Let Nothing Move You!*

Graduation Address

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by *Armin J. Panning*

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15: 56-58).

Dear colleagues, families and friends of the graduates, and especially you, the members of the graduating class, our young brothers and co-workers:

People who have been through a major earthquake tell us that it is one of the most terrifying experiences on earth. What you always thought of as solid and steady suddenly proves not to be so. Solid ground, good old terra firma, suddenly becomes fluid. It heaves and tosses in great waves, and it rolls and bobs about like a bowl of jello. Not having something solid beneath us is terribly unsettling to our sense of safety and stability. But if that is the case in our everyday life, how much more is that not true of our spiritual life. There we have not just temporal consequences, endangering a life of 60 or 70 years duration, but there eternity is at stake. Spiritually we need something to hang on to, something solid to stand on, something that will not move. And we have that! It is the glorious fact of Christ's resurrection.

I. **Victorious over sin and death**

You graduates have chosen as your class motto the closing verse of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's great resurrection chapter. There the apostle points to the centrality of Christ's resurrection for all that we believe and teach and do. "If Christ has not been raised," he declares, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith. . . . Your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (vv. 14,17).

But, thank God, Paul can continue, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v 20). Christ was the first to be raised, and countless thousands will follow him and escape the clutches of death for all eternity. Hence Paul can exultantly exclaim,

"Death has been swallowed up in victory" (v 54). And then, in almost taunting terms, he addresses death directly, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Those, however, are not just rhetorical questions to which the answers are obvious and self-evident. Paul answers the questions. He takes up the matter of death's "sting" in the opening words of our text when he says, "The sting of death is sin."

What does Paul mean with the term "the sting of death"? The picture Paul uses would be clearer to us if we lived back in the days of ox-drawn carts. The word translated as "sting" is really the term for an ox goad, the long, pointed stick the driver used to poke the ox and make it go where he wanted it to go and at the speed he wanted it to go.

The modern equivalent of the old-fashioned ox goad might be a club or a whip.

Paul says: The club or the whip death uses to get us to go his way is sin. Sin can be used in that coercing and compelling way because it is strong and powerful, and it has a hold on us. “The power of sin,” Paul says, “is the law.”

Sin can harness the full force and authority of God’s holy law to make a case against us. God has said, “Thou shalt,” but we have not done it. He says, “Thou shalt not,” and there we stand, caught red-handed, doing precisely what the law told us not to do. That is sin, and a just and holy God, the giver of the law, says, “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Eze 18:4). “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23).

Death has a perfect right to claim the sinner. Death is the proper punishment for sin — or at least, it should be, and it would be, if it were not for the grace and mercy of our Savior God. Paul concedes, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

God’s own Son became true man and came down to earth to take our place. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves; he kept the law perfectly in our stead. And he undid what we had done amiss. He gave his life as the full payment for our sins, and thus he broke the power of sin. Stripped of the power of sin and the strength of the law, death is a defeated foe. Death could not hold Christ, and he rose on the third day. Christ gained the victory.

But it was a victory not just for himself. Paul says, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Through faith in Christ his victory becomes our victory. God gives it to us by grace, as a gift. Christ rose from the grave, and we too shall rise from our graves to live with him eternally in heaven. Christ’s resurrection is the solid ground, the foundation, the bedrock, on which to base our whole life and existence.

It is with eyes fixed on the resurrection that Paul utters the words you have chosen as your class motto, “Therefore [that is, in view of the resurrection] my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you.”

II. Fully committed to the Lord’s work

The encouragement to stand firm is spoken, of course, to all believers, but it applies in a special way to you, our young brothers, as you leave the seminary and take up the areas of responsibility that have recently been, or, God willing, soon will be, assigned to you. Whether your assignment is to be the pastor of an established congregation, or to be a home missionary to start a new church, or perhaps to be a tutor or instructor, or to serve as a missionary in a foreign field, to each of you the apostle says, “Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.”

Note that it is the Lord’s work you are doing. He has designated you to serve in his kingdom. It is not a self-chosen task you are undertaking. You did not ask for placement into this or that area, nor to a specific type of work. No, rather, through God’s representatives, through a formally constituted assignment committee of our church, the Lord has appointed to you a special field of labor. He has given you a divine call; he has asked you to be his mouthpiece and his spokesman.

Being a spokesman for God also tells you what you are to say. In the opening chapter of Acts we are given a glimpse into the first call meeting held in the Christian church after Pentecost. Gathered together to call a replacement for Judas, the church spelled out not only the qualifications of the man to be called, but it also outlined his “job description,” the work he was to do. We hear Peter say, “It is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us” (Ac 1:21,22). And then he describes the task, the assignment: “For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” Being a witness to Christ’s resurrection that is the heart of doing the Lord’s work.

Note that this was central also to Paul’s work. In the opening verses of this chapter from which our text is taken, Paul says, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (vv. 3,4).

Follow Paul’s lead! With the apostle, savor Christ’s victory over sin and death. Rejoice in his resurrection, and see in it the sure hope of your own resurrection. And then go out and share that hope with others.

“Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord”—not just when you feel like it, not just when it is convenient, not just when your efforts are noticed and appreciated, but “always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.” With Paul be a constant witness of Christ’s resurrection. Pass on what you have received as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

That message dare not be dulled by conflicting or competing emphases on our part, such as the promotion of social causes, or dabbling in politics, or pursuing our own personal interests and projects. “Always give yourself fully to the Lord’s work.” Nothing less than total commitment is acceptable for so great a task.

III. Confident of success in the Lord

Being asked to give yourself fully to the Lord’s work is, quite frankly, a daunting assignment. It is a tall order, one that will surely tire you out and fatigue you, one that will wear you down. Paul himself is open and honest in calling it “work,” and referring to it as “labor.”

And yet, he has the courage to recommend it to you, yes, strongly to urge it on you as a life’s calling. On what basis can he do that? He says, “Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

To be sure, it will involve toil and hardship, but work done in the Lord’s Vineyard will “not be in vain.” The expression “not in vain” is a double negative that equals a positive. It is a gross understatement that emphasizes the positive. Not only will work done in the kingdom not be in vain, it will be gloriously successful and outstandingly fruitful.

Paul says, “You know that your labor in the Lord will not be in vain.” How do you know that? Not by outward observation, not by looking at things as they appear externally. That could give you a totally wrong impression.

Look at the outward appearance of the church: membership in mainline churches is declining; respect for the clergy is diminishing as their message seems ever more out of step with a society that is becoming increasingly secular and pagan; the family is becoming ever more imperiled; financial problems keep growing. Things do not look good in the church. And yet Paul says, “You know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” It is all going to turn out gloriously successful.

How do you know that? Not by what you see, but rather by what the Lord says.

It is the very Son of God, who not only died for your sins but who rose again, yes, who ascended in triumph to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God the Father—he says to you, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18).

He has given you a specific area of responsibility in his kingdom. He is sending you out to proclaim his message of which he says, “My word . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). Your risen and ascended Lord assures you, “Your labor will not be in vain.” He will grant you the measure of success that best serves his kingdom.

Therefore, my dear brothers, as you take up your calling and throughout all the years of the ministry that lies ahead, remember your class motto: “Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” Amen.

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