

The rocket pointed straight to the skies. Seven stories tall, it was the same rocket that was being tested over the previous weeks. These weren't rockets of war. They were for space exploration. And not one of them worked. Some exploded on the launch pad, some went up only to go so off course they had to be blown up on purpose. America was doing this because the Russians already were launching rockets into space. Sputnik, the first manmade object to orbit the earth. Yuri Gagarin, the first man to go into space. If this was a race, America was losing. And it seemed America was out of its league. The best our rockets could do was blow up.

Despite those sad results, on the morning of May 5, 1961 astronaut Alan Shepherd climbed the seven stories, sat on top of explosive rocket fuel, and waited for ignition. Shepherd waited to become the first American in space. The country held its collective breath. The countdown continued. It seemed America's fate going forward was tied up in Alan Shepherd's fate. If it worked America would be successful. If the rocket blew up America would be wounded for a long time.

Men like Alan Shepherd were chosen because they had the right stuff. Test pilots are a rare breed; they're the best of the best. When invitations went out to become part of the first group of astronauts only 101 test pilots were invited. Of those only seven were chosen to actually be astronauts. Of those only Alan Shepherd was chosen to be the first American in space. He won the right to sit atop that rocket with the very real chance of blowing up. And it wasn't surprising when the engineers found a problem on the morning of the launch. That's when Shepherd's voice came over the radio. "Light this candle!" That's the right stuff.

This morning we face an enemy greater than the Soviet Union. We face a fearful situation greater than sitting on top of seven stories of rocket fuel with the chance to blow up. It's an enemy who's always there, always attacking, and always close. Ultimately this enemy will come for each of us. This enemy is death. We don't have the right stuff in that battle. We don't because not only are we facing it but everyone around is facing it too.

The women walking to the tomb early Easter morning were clearly facing death. They thought they had seen their man with the right stuff. But it was all over now. Jesus was dead and gone. All they could do in the midst of the emptiness was anoint the body with some spices and walk away disappointed. Another potential hero had come and gone. Death won again.

But something was wrong when they arrived at the tomb. The guards were gone. The stone was rolled away. The grave was open and they could look in. There was no dead body. There were angels. Those angels told them that Easter changes everything. **"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is risen. He is not here—just as he said."** This was all according to plan then? Jesus knew all along. And of course he did tell them.

In the second lesson Paul writes to the Corinthians who seem to have forgotten the most important message they ever received. Not forgotten, just lost sight of it for a while. **"Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand."** Simple gospel, that's all it was. A simple message. **"By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you."** They were remembering, they were clinging to that Word of God. And this was the simple gospel message. **"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."** Everything had happened according to the plan. The cross, the burial, even the empty tomb was the plan, it was in the Scriptures. Jesus was the man with the right stuff and it was his whole reason for living. Jesus came to defeat death by dying. These ladies found out just like all the rest, the tomb was the last place to look for Jesus. He was alive, not dead. Chants of victory could start to grow.

When someone says to you that death is just a part of life you know they're lying. Well, at the very least they're mistaken or misunderstanding. Death was never supposed to be a part of life. Death is an intrusion into the life that God wanted us to have. He made us so we might live and never die. But Adam and Eve changed all that. You changed all that with the sins you committed. It's been all over your heart and mind. Every day, every hour, all the time sin is there. You can't get rid of it. You can't do anything about it. Sin collects too. Sin drags down. Sin is what makes you deserving of death. Sin gives death its sting.

We don't have the right stuff to fight against it or defeat it ourselves. We convince ourselves we do though. We make promises that we'll never do it again. We think if we feel bad enough that will make up for the wrongdoing. If we pout enough, or look sad, or cry that will offset the bad. We think if we can do some good things that will balance out the sinful actions. Maybe God will let the bad stuff slide. Look away, pat us on the head for trying, or sweep it under the rug. But it won't work. Sin needs a payment and we don't have the right stuff.

That's why God sent the man with the right stuff. He would be the one going into the battle. He would be the one facing the wrath. He would be the one experiencing everything we should have experienced. And God promised we never would because of him. He faced the cross, not you. He took the crown of thorns, not you. It was Jesus on Good Friday lying on the cross of wood with his arms outstretched going into battle with the right stuff. That's where he did it. That's where he died for you and me. That's where all our failures, guilt, and sins were punished in Jesus and not us. That's when he said, **"It is finished."**

Paul considered himself an apostle even though he hadn't been with Jesus during his ministry. Some might have said he didn't have the right stuff. He was an apostle "abnormally born." But this is what Jesus did for him. "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect." Paul was the worst. He persecuted Christians. Yet an amazing thing happened. He was forgiven. His faults and guilt were taken away in God's grace.

You might not be like Paul. But there are days you feel like Paul. You feel like you don't have the right stuff to even deserve living one more day. But remember God's grace. Remember how God set all your sins, your guilt, your faults, your shame on Jesus. It's gone. Forgiven, forgotten, forever. God promises you today that not even death can hold you. It's been swallowed up in victory.

The countdown continued. They lit the candle. And on May 5, 1961 Alan Shepherd flew 115 miles straight up into space and came back safely. One man with the right stuff had won a victory for the whole country. Shepherd's victory was America's victory. Twenty days later President Kennedy announced a plan to go to the moon.

Today is all about the man with the right stuff. Jesus stepped into the battle for you, the battle against death and sin. He went to the cross in your place. He rose from the dead to show you what would happen to you someday. He defeated death forever. And now he promises that death isn't the end, not for those that believe and trust in him, the man with the right stuff. **His cross. His crown. Our Victory.**