

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS 3: "THE TRANSFORMATIONAL SAVIOR"

What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation.
Galatians 6:15

In a couple weeks we'll begin the church-wide small group Lenten study: The Treasures of a Transformed life. Today I want to lay the foundation for understanding that transformation. 2 Weeks ago I began to explain our chosen theme for 2008: "It's All About Jesus." We started by considering his BIRTH as the miraculous fulfillment of multiple Old Testament prophecies. In considering that, we determined that since Jesus was indeed that fulfillment; then God's Word had authority, Christ's Identity was authenticated, and Jesus' mission was accomplished. Last week we studied the one defining aspect of his LIFE: his unusual teaching. We discovered that Jesus taught with a marvelous blend of authority and compassion, and left ourselves to decide if we would accept or reject that authoritative teaching and left ourselves to decide if we would adhere to that compassionate teaching, or simply go on through life alone.

Today, we'll consider the two most important aspects of Jesus, because they are inseparable; his DEATH and his RESURRECTION. This is uniquely a "Christian" message, for what often divides men and women from a casual acknowledgement of Jesus, and a full-blown commitment to Jesus; is what we believe about His death and Resurrection, and how we believe in them translates into our daily life. It's not hard to say you believe Jesus was born a virgin. It's not hard to say you believe Jesus was a great teacher. But it is quite another thing all together to claim to believe that Jesus died a purposeful yet tortured physical death, and that He was physically raised again from the dead to live eternally.

What you say you believe about these two realities affects all your life. Not just your church life, but your past, sinful life. Not just your “spiritual life”, but also your secular, even what you think to be your secret life. Jesus’ death and resurrection; and our belief in those realities determine not just our life here and now, but our eternity forever.

Mark Twain; a notoriously faithless man; became morose and weary of life at the end. Shortly before his death, he wrote, "A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle;...they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little mean advantages over each other; age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; ...those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. It (the release, death) comes at last--the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them--and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence...a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever." Pretty clear that Twain had never come to terms with Christ’s death and resurrection as a reality for his life, which led to his meaningless approach to death and beyond.

Contrast that picture of death with that of an anonymous believer who was explaining to his wife the real meaning of death. For the record, I wish this to be read at my funeral. “Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always did. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me as I pray for you. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without a ghost of a shadow upon it.

Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is death but a negligible inconvenience? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well. God is good.”

The consequences of Jesus’ death and resurrection are these:

1. THROUGH THE DEATH OF CHRIST WE CAN BE FORGIVEN

There is hardly any limit to the positive things we receive for believing in Christ, especially his atoning death; but there is one that overshadows all others; the fact that because Jesus died, we can be forgiven. Is there any greater consequence than that? Is there any greater need than this? Is there any greater news than this? Is there any better time than now? No, no, a thousand times no.

Billy Graham claims that 75% of people residing in mental care facilities the world over could go home immediately if they could just be convinced that their sins might be forgiven. We are tortured every day by the news media that continues to report senseless, mindless, unconscionable killings, abuses, tortures, rapes and perversions; many perpetrated by people who have never known, or who have forgotten that sin can be forgiven! The churches across the country this very day are full of people living in the veiled hope that no one might find out what they really think in their minds, that no one would discover what they really do in the secret of their homes, that no one would come to know what they really harbor in their hearts...that they are convinced can’t be forgiven. But they can be.

I will never understand it...nor will I ever again doubt it...that God sent His only son, to live so I could figure out how to live and to die so I wouldn’t have to. God’s irrefutable, immutable, unchangeable law of choice and consequence demands that all sin pay a horrific wage...death and separation from God.

And this is the reality that drives me to my knees; God chose to pay that price by sending and allowing His only Son to take our place there on the judgment seat, there in the heavenly courtroom, there in the prison cell of our past, there in the wicked wretched recesses of our minds, there in the ignoble intentions of our hearts. Where sin abounded, grace exceeded! Where sins reigned, grace found us. Where death ruled, Christ overruled! AMEN!!!

I was awakened early Tuesday morning with this question: What is the most remarkable thing about Jesus' death? What would you answer? Would you point to the injustice of that sham trial, or the inhumanity of that traitorous human kiss; or the shamefulness of those criminal executioners, or the personal pain for his family and friends? What is the most remarkable thing about Jesus' death? Its tragic nature, its tortured endurance, its overwhelming sadness as God turned his head away from his only Son? I was struck with this: the most remarkable thing about Jesus' death was that it was done willingly. John 10:18 says:

No one takes my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For you...for me...

Jesus died to forgive our sins. The consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection are these: Through the death of Christ we are saved, through the death of Christ we can be forgiven, through the death of Christ we can live freely. The second consequence:

2. THROUGH THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST WE CAN BE TRANSFORMED

Even though we were dead because of our sins, God gave us life when He raised Christ from the dead. Eph. 2:5

He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them...This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Cor. 5: 15,17

Our minds don't have to reach far to comprehend the reality of death, we are all personally and well acquainted with that. But for us to wrap our heads around this second reality...this resurrection reality; might take a bit more work, and a bit more... faith.

We don't see many resurrections these days, though prayers for such accompany most every death I attend. Even in various other religions, and other regions of the world where claims to resurrection are made; skepticism and doubt carry the day. Yet here we are facing the fact that the keystone, pivotal event that makes or breaks the reality of GOD...is...the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And the determinate indicator of our ability to live in anyway, shape or form beyond or above our current reality is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I believe that Jesus Christ lived and died, and was physically raised from the dead. I do so not because it is recorded in a book I revere, not because it was promised hundreds and thousands of years prior, not because I'm smart enough to intellectually figure it out, not because my seminary professor told me I should, or the BOM wouldn't ordain me if I didn't. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, because I once was lost but now I'm found, I once was blind but now I see, I once was dead, but now I'm alive, I once was sin – full, but now I'm forgiven; I once was “formed” but now, I've been transformed.

I believe in the resurrection of Jesus because Jesus Christ changed my life. No I wasn't a terrible person, nor any more special than any of you; I was just bad enough to need saving! I believe in the resurrection because through a long and hard struggle occupying most every waking moment of my life; I've come to realize that my good intentions to live a good life, are... worthless. There is no transformation without a resurrection. There is no resurrection without first a death.

There are plenty of people who would like to see or even make changes in their lives. They want a better job, or a happier family, or more money, or lower taxes, or less disease, or whatever. Some even look to the church to help them reach those objectives.

Yet achieving those results will not, cannot happen naturally. No matter who wins the Whitehouse or the Iraq war, there must not be any grand illusion that life on this planet will be any different than it currently is unless the resurrection of Jesus becomes a reality in your life and mine, in our country and the Middle East, in the state capitol and Washington DC.

I'm not just pining to be pious or right, I'm stating the truth as I know it to be true; where there is no death there is no forgiveness of sins; and where there is no resurrection, there is nothing but existence. Transformation has to have a source, and good intentions provide marginal results. God sent Jesus, used him to teach us, allowed us to kill him, and then raised him back to life, in order to bring about change in us! The command to be "born again" is a fanciful fairy tale if resurrection is not possible. Living above the din of human sin, and the accompanying stain are all we can expect if we discount, deny or disregard the factual physical reality of Jesus, dead...come back to life!

The consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection are these: Through the resurrection of Christ we can be changed, through the resurrection of Christ we can be transformed, through the resurrection of Christ we can live abundantly and eternally.

Here's how Paul said it: (remember his transformation?):

For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! Phil. 3:9-11

If death got the upper hand through one man's wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, sovereign life, in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right; that the one man Jesus Christ provides? Rom. 5:17 The Message

Both realities; death and resurrection require a choice. No one is forgiven unless they ask. No one is transformed who is unwilling. Just like Paul, we too must experience a death and a resurrection. We must 'grasp it with both hands'. It is not enough too look for, seek after, or even receive the gift of forgiveness; and not allow God's forgiveness to transform us into forgivers, and lovers of His new life. It is nothing but a useless house of cards to try and live the good life, without first experiencing 'the good death'; death to sin, and death to self.

These two inseparable characteristics most richly define who Jesus was...and is. The choice to come and die, or leave unchanged will define who you are! The choice to leave and live an extraordinary and transformed life is yours to make...now!

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