

No Righteousness of My Own

Easter 2011

John 5:28, 29

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Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 “and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28,29).

Introduction

I’m not a very good sleeper. Somebody recommended that I read light material before I go to bed at night so instead of having John Calvin on my nightstand I’ve been reading Calvin and Hobbes (it’s a comic strip).

Interestingly enough I came upon this little dialogue between Calvin and tiger-friend, Hobbes: They were sitting against a tree and just enjoying an afternoon when Calvin perked up and asked, “What if there’s no afterlife? Suppose this is all we get?” Hobbes looks around and responds, “Oh, what the heck. I’ll take it anyway.” To which Calvin (who always more accurately represents genuine human nature) responds, “Yeah, but if I’m not going to be eternally rewarded for my behavior, I’d sure like to know now.” I’ll get back to this.

Jesus was crucified on a Friday. On the following Sunday morning when the two Mary’s went to His tomb they found it empty. Then Jesus appeared to them, then to the twelve then to over five hundred (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). He appeared to them in the flesh. It wasn’t as if He merely lived on in their memories as some would interpret the gospels. They touched Him (1 John 1:1). The far-reaching effects of this phenomenon are difficult for our finite minds to grasp, but we can know this for sure...death isn’t the end.

Every story ever written by any author, every historical event ever recorded in the annals of time, whether pristine, wholesome and inspiring or loathsome, abhorrent and detestable has the same inevitable conclusion – a they all die. My father was a member of the Screen Actors Guild. So I grew up enjoying old movies. They were the exciting, fun up-beat movies of the thirties and forties. Movies designed to help people forget the depression and the war. At the risk of sounding morbid, when I watch those ‘happy-ending’ movies now I see a screen of people who are no longer living. As one of my buddies at the beach told me about life, “nobody gets out alive.” Every person and every story has the same ending -- death.

Except for this one.

The gospels end with the hero of the story conquering death. That which has been heralded as the greatest story ever told is just that because its ending is not death but life. What we learn from the gospels is that when these present bodies decay and die; when we breathe our last breath that is not the end of the story. In very many ways it is merely the beginning.

The Resurrection of Christ...and All People

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, in one way or another, must be the subject of every sermon. It testifies of His power over death, His assuming His position as King of kings, His Lordship, His Godhood, His victory and much more. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the essence of the Christian faith. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians,

And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸ Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

The fall of man resulted in death but the victory of Christ at His resurrection results in life. And the life we speak of is not His life only but ours as well because He is the firstborn of many brethren (Romans 8:29). This is the aspect of the resurrection I speak of this morning. You see we are told that men will be resurrected as well and in a similar manner. Paul writes that Jesus,

shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself (Philippians 3:21).

The Bible teaches that we will spend eternity in physical bodies. We don't end up spirit-beings. We don't lose our individuality. We aren't like a drop of water poured out into an ocean of life-energy. We are given new, physical incorruptible bodies. Jesus says in John 5,

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ "and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28,29).

Calvin's Nagging Suspicion

So here is a big twist in the story. Nobody's existence ever ends. Everyone is resurrected. Those who have done good to life and those who have done evil to condemnation. Now this brings us back to our little friend Calvin.

Calvin has this nagging suspicion that he is going to be answerable to someone – someone who is great in counsel (who truly knows right from wrong) – mighty in deed (who has the power to call men into account) – and genuinely sees all the ways of the children of man (who knows everything about us, even our deepest thoughts). Little Calvin's discomfort is not without warrant:

The Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds (Jeremiah 32:18, 19).

But if you read Calvin (whether John Calvin or Calvin and Hobbes) his uneasiness of standing before God is heightened by his awareness of his own sin and inability to conjure up a good enough conscience to get him through this holy and extremely accurate evaluation.

A general resurrection of all men, good and evil, is hardly (at least at face value) good news for Calvin – or anyone else for that matter. Sometimes we comfort ourselves, when we see great evil in the world, that God is a just God who will deal with the Hitlers, Stalins and the Bin Ladens as He did with the ancient kings of Egypt and Babylon. But it makes me a little nervous when people think of their own judgment before God and then hope God is fair or just. King David certainly didn't desire that.

Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you (Psalm 143:2).

From Bad News to Good News

In that final resurrection that last thing on earth we want is for God to be merely just. So how is the final resurrection transformed from universal bad news into good news (which is what the word 'gospel' means)? The Apostle Peter explains:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

So, even though no man is just (*dikaios* – righteous) before God, there is a just or righteous One who suffered for sinners in such a way as to **“bring us to God.”** Peter was a man who, in his denials of even knowing Jesus, had a close encounter with his own sin and guilt:

But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62).

This event in Peter’s life, no doubt had a burning and lasting effect upon his conscious (talk about a feeling of guilt). But Peter would later write of having a good conscience before God.

There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Peter 3:21, 22).

Baptism is a sign (Peter pretty clearly dispels the idea that water baptism itself can accomplish anything redemptive apart from faith) that people, through faith in the resurrected Christ can have a good conscience before God.

I don’t know if any of us have ever felt as guilty as David or Peter or Calvin, but if Jesus in the flesh turning and looking at Peter in that one sin could bring him to bitter weeping, how much more will we crumble before the soul-searching eyes of the glorified Christ when He examines the entirety of our transgressions revealing the just condemnation we all deserve.

Our hope, only hope in that final resurrection, is to be found in a righteousness that is not our own. When it came to religious convictions there were few people who could match the Apostle Paul: He was circumcised at the

perfect time in the perfect way, he was part of the right family, he had reached the pinnacle of clerical status and engaged in the public denouncing of those who stood against God as he understood Him.

But when Paul, by the grace of God, became aware of the true nature of his own sin the august nature of a holy and righteous God and the grace found in Christ, the last thing on earth or heaven he wanted was to be found in his own righteousness (to be judged according to his own goodness). He put it this way:

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:3-11).