

A Conversation on Christ

Knowing Jesus brings the deepest purpose, joy, and peace that the human heart can ever experience. The Apostle Paul said this about knowing Jesus: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 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” (Philippians 3:7-9). There are many wonderful things in our lives. I don’t think being a Christian requires us to devalue God’s good gifts to us. Indeed, to devalue what God has given us would be ingratitude and sin. Yet at the same time, all things pale in comparison to Jesus. The love of family can not compare to the love of Christ. The blessing of a good job cannot compare to the blessing of being united to Jesus. The security of a nice home has nothing on being at home with our Lord. Paul did not hate creation or people or God’s good gifts all around him. You should not hate creation or people or God’s good gifts all around you. And yet Paul counted the blessings of his past life as rubbish that he might gain Christ. The ultimate focus of his heart was singular: “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:14). We can have no greater goal than to press on toward the same prize.

How can we even begin to speak about who Jesus is and what he has done? We could take time this morning to display his character or expound his teachings. Indeed, we must remind ourselves that Jesus offers the best information ever presented concerning how we are to live in this world. I was reminded this week of something once written by the philosopher Dallas Willard:

[Jesus has] cognitive and practical mastery of every phase of reality: physical, moral, and spiritual. He is Master only because he is Maestro. “Jesus is Lord” can mean little in practice for anyone

who has to hesitate before saying, “Jesus is smart.” He is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it. He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life.¹

To speak in the terms of the Apostle, it would be worthwhile to count all teachings as loss that we might gain the teachings of Jesus. Yet this morning, my goal is to recount to you something of the work of Jesus. What has Jesus done and what is he doing? And what does this work mean for our ordinary lives? How does this work address the people around you, the people to whom you speak every day? The subject is, of course, far more expansive than what could be explicated in a year’s worth of sermons. But allow me to simply share three things with you today.

Incarnation. The magisterial prologue of John’s Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Several verses later, the Gospel writer pens one of the most breathtaking statements ever conceived: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This Word made flesh was conceived in the womb of Mary, not through normal means of conception, but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, so that the child was called “holy – the Son of God” (Luke 1:25). When Jesus’s birth was announced to the shepherds by the angel, the word was this: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). By this point in Luke’s gospel, Mary had used the title Lord and Savior to refer to God directly: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). And yet the angel’s proclamation is that these titles apply to the infant Jesus. The teaching of the orthodox faith, flowing out of the testimony of Scripture, is that Jesus is human nature and divine nature brought together in one person. He is the Son of God made man, and even now he reigns in heaven as the God-Man forever.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 95.

What does this mean for us? You were made to have fellowship with God. The very structures of your body, mind, and emotions were crafted so that you could have communion with God. And without this communion, your life fails to live up to its perfect purpose. Adam and Eve walked in Eden with God. They did not float out of their bodies and have mystic experiences. They fellowshiped with him as flesh and blood, thinking, feeling people. That is what you were made to do and that is what you have lost because of rebellion and wrongdoing. But in Christ human nature fellowships eternally with divine nature. Your humanity is in heaven with Jesus. And the Holy Spirit brings Christ to you as you walk on earth. And one day God's people will have perfect communion with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

Death. Ever since the sin of Adam and Eve, one of the greatest problems is how a holy God can have relationship with an unholy people. The book of Leviticus was particularly interested in making it possible for the chosen people of Israel to know the presence of God in their midst. At the heart of Leviticus lies instructions for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The high priest was permitted to go before the ark of the covenant in the most holy place for one day. He carried the blood of a bull and a goat to make atonement for himself and for the people. The blood purified the tent of meeting or temple so that it was cleansed of the sin of the people. The priest would then take a second goat and confess the sins of the people over the goat, before sending it away into the wilderness. Two great principles are embedded into this ritual. First, blood must be shed to make purification for sin. The sacrificial offerings were substitutionary deaths which made cleansing possible. Sin pollutes and must be washed away. The blood of the sin offerings was like a disinfectant to cleanse away impurity. Second, a substitute must bear the sins of the people and carry them into exile. Because the substitute carries sin into exile, the people do not have to be exiled. They can be at home with God because of the work of the sin-bearer.

This background gives us deep insight into what happened on Good Friday. First, Jesus gave up his own blood to make purification for sin. This is part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. As the institution of the sacrament is recorded in Mark: "And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many'" (Mark. 14:23-24). The wine reminds

us of the blood which Christ gave at the cross to cleanse the cosmos of sin. The writer of Hebrews held that Christ carried his blood into the very heavenly sanctuary. “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:11-12). When the high priest cleansed the holy place, he cleansed the place from which God ruled over and dwelled with Israel. When Jesus brought his blood in to the heavenly holy place, he cleansed the place from which God rules over and dwells with his people all over the world. Second, Jesus was a sin-bearer. Paul describes this bearing of sin in a memorable way: “For our sake [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ carried the burden of sin into exile so that God’s people could be at home with him.

What does this mean for us? We have disobeyed God. We have done things that God did not want us to do. And we have not done things which God wanted us to do. At the base of our lives, we have turned our hearts from God. The consequence of this sin problem is that our world is polluted with our wrongdoing. The world is full of brokenness and pain. And we are in exile. We are separate from God, alienated from one another and the creation itself. The Bible is clear that the result of this sin problem is that we are under the power of the devil, surrounded by self-made misery while we live, and headed for death and hell in the end. Hell is not the final word, however, for those who put their trust in Christ. Christ died for us and for our salvation. Christ poured out his blood. Christ carried his blood into heaven so that he could make “eternal redemption” for his people. He bore your sin into the wilderness that you might dwell with God through faith.

Resurrection. The Bible is a practical book. Practical books show us how things really work and how to live honestly in the real world. The biblical writers wrestle honestly and openly with death because they know that death is the great barrier looming over all things. If we could establish perfect justice, gain wild amounts of wealth, and spend the rest of our lives in delirious happiness, we would in the end still die. Therefore, Paul frankly states in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that death is “the last enemy to be destroyed.” Beginning

with Adam's sin, death has loomed over our world, slowly stalking some and quickly pouncing on others. The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate death of death. Paul teaches that Christ has been raised as "firstfruits" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). He is the first in a harvest of resurrection, which will be the final conquest of death. His resurrection guarantees that all who believe in him will also conquer death. Jesus will subdue all his enemies, and, on the basis of what he accomplished in his death and resurrection two thousand years ago, bring the entire cosmos under the full and righteous rule of his Father.

What does this mean for us? It means that death is your enemy. Death stalks you. But you don't have to be its victim. You can be ready to face death right now. In fact, Jesus can so conquer and master the death of a Christian, that the thing which is our great enemy becomes the gateway to eternal life and joy. Contrary to the old adage, death is not a part of life. Death is the opposite of life. But Jesus breaks the power of death and turns it to his glorious purposes. Are you ready to face death? I know that this is a bracing question, but the good news of the Gospel gives us all the resources we need to stare down death and claim victory over the power of the grave. The key is that we are joined to Jesus. We are, through faith, bound to him in his death, and, through faith, bound to him in his resurrection. Because he lives, so too will we live.

What does this mean for us? Fellowship with God, the cleansing of our sin, and victory over death. These things are offered to each one of us through the work of Jesus. Do you trust Jesus? Have you given your heart and life over to him? Do you know what will happen to you when you stand before God in judgment? No one needs to end this day with uncertainty when it comes to your relationship with Jesus. As I close this morning, I turn to a prayer printed as #454 in our hymnal. For some of us this prayer is renewal and reminder. But for someone else this prayer may be the beginning of life with Jesus.