

The Exaltation of Christ

Preface

I often reflect on all the funerals I have officiated. I think of all I will yet officiate. I think of my own. In a certain sense I view the heart of my job, as a pastor, to be a lifelong preparation—for myself and for others—for that day. The Reverend John Owen said that he preached as a dying man to dying men. Some might view this as a bit macabre or grim. It is anything but. How much more joyful the journey when the destination is glory rather than a cliff! There is nothing more germane to the preparation for death than the topic at hand—the resurrection of Christ.

Not only have I officiated many a memorial service—I have attended many as well. Seldom is a memorial service so atheistic that the grace of God is not evoked in some way. The grace of God always works its way into the program. But what is it about God's grace that has kept the human race afloat for these many centuries? Is the grace of God just a meaningless platitude to help us through tough periods in our lives? The grace of God often becomes Play-Doh in the hands of the speaker. He morphs it whithersoever he wills. I remember a memorial service of a former student where a teacher was seeking to calm down a teenage girl. The girl was wailing incessantly. The teacher said, "His soul will only be comforted when we stop crying." Then the teacher looked to me for affirmation. The sapless nature of the proposition left me stunned and paralyzed. It's no wonder that the intellectual community, who can so easily perceive this recklessness, has abandoned religion as puerile (silly).

Is there substance and specificity to God's grace? Is there something we can actually hold onto when it comes to God's grace? When the wisest man who ever lived uttered the words which appear so contrary to our experience,

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

Was he setting aside reason? Was he mad? Is there beef that we, as members of the human race, can sink our teeth into when it comes to the grace of God as it speaks to our deaths? Is there order to this grace? Is there any reason we should think there is grace? And if so, is there any legitimate reason why we should think ourselves recipients of it?

Review—Promise

Last week we mentioned how Jesus resisted bringing twelve legions of angels upon the Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:53). Why wouldn't He do such a thing? How can we be confident that He wouldn't do such a thing? How can we be confident that He won't just send another flood and annihilate the entire human race? The substantial answer to all these questions can be summed up in one word, *promise*.

The grace of God is neither meaningless nor random. There is wonderful substance and specificity to His grace. And what we, as a race, have to hold onto regarding the grace of God is the promise of God. Jesus didn't bring the legions of angels because He, essentially, is God's promise—His promise to redeem humanity. Look at the force of God's promise in Hebrews. It comes in the form of an oath.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,¹⁴ saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you..."¹⁷ Thus God,

determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath (Hebrews 6:13, 14, 17).

God is the promise-maker and He is the promise-keeper. Let us briefly review the nature of this promise. We spoke of God's *covenant/promise* with man—a promise of redemption where He would extend His grace to fallen humanity. We spoke of the sufficiency of the *Mediator*, the active agent, of this covenant—that He (Christ), being man, properly represents men while, at the same time, being God, did not sink under the infinite wrath of God. We spoke of the offices of this Mediator—*Prophet* (the mouthpiece of God), *Priest* (the sacrifice and intercessor for men), and *King* (the potentate who would bring forth the victory of His kingdom over darkness).

We then pondered the journey of the Mediator—His *humiliation* consisting of His birth, life, and death. We will now speak of His *exaltation*. The exaltation (literally, *to lift up*) of Christ includes His resurrection, ascension, His sitting at the right hand of the Father, and His coming again in judgment. This morning we will consider only His resurrection.

The Resurrection

I will seek to answer three questions regarding the resurrection: What fundamentally took place at the resurrection of Christ? How is it a blessing to us? And what should it evoke in us?

If ever there was a lynchpin in the plan of redemption it is the resurrection. The Apostle Paul says of the resurrection.

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty...¹⁷ 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 15:14, 17-19).

Clearly if the resurrection of Christ is removed from the equation, there is no equation. If my trust in Christ is not eternally focused via the hope of the resurrection—if I merely trust Him for the here and now—"in this life" I am pitiful. This makes more sense in the Apostle's context, where Christians were being persecuted for their faith. Certainly the wisdom of Christ is superior to the wisdom of the world in every respect. That is, it would be better for the unbeliever to trust the moral teachings of Christ than not. But Paul's point should not be missed. The resurrection is the heart of the redemptive matter.

Aspects of the Resurrection

What happened at the resurrection of Christ? What fundamentally took place during this event called the resurrection?

The exaltation of Christ's resurrection, in a sense, began during the humiliation of His death in that His body did not undergo the corruption of death (Acts 2:27). Christ's victory was a complete victory. Although the marks/scars of death remained as a testimony to the reality of His suffering (Luke 24:39), the corruption of death would find no home in the body of Christ.

These scars also reveal that Christ's resurrected body was essentially the same body in which He suffered. It was not some vaporous or ethereal body. He doesn't merely live on in our memories or some such thing. He physically came back to life.

Jesus rose from the dead by His own power (John 10:18) for it was not possible that death could hold Him (Acts 2:24). Jesus truly accomplished that which no mere man could ever accomplish—the defeat of mankind’s final enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Arguably it is the resurrection of Christ that changed the world. Even His detractors knew this would be the case.

On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate,⁶³ saying, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’⁶⁴ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him *away*, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.”⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go your way, make *it* as secure as you know how.”⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard (Matthew 27:62-66).

If the Romans or Jews could have produced the dead body of Christ, the Christian religion would have ended immediately. Such would not be the case. Jesus is risen; He is risen indeed.

What Are the Blessings of the Resurrection?

So what are the blessings of the resurrection for believers? What makes this event central to the Christian faith and, quite frankly, to the entire human race? First, it assures and secures our justification (acquittal) before God. The Apostle Paul writes of Jesus,

...who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification (Romans 4:25).

The completeness of Christ’s redemptive work becomes apparent at the resurrection. John Owen explains it this way:

...when the angel descended from heaven and rolled back the great stone from the door of the sepulcher, this speaks to us, that the justice of God is satisfied, the ransom of our iniquity has been paid, that Christ rendered a full discharge of all the debt for which He undertook as a great surety between God and the sinners who believe in Him.¹

If a community sends a man on a mission (say to save that community from a predator), they look for some indication that their man has succeeded. If Christ had not risen He would merely be another martyr. There would have been no conquering of death and no warrant to trust that He could vanquish death for others. Had Christ secretly ascended with no public display of His resurrection, the assurance of His victory would not be known.

Secondly, the resurrection of Christ serves as a model of our resurrection.

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the

¹ *Calvin’s Commentary on Romans* (Baker Book House), p. 186.

working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (Philippians 3:20, 21).

Since His resurrection prefigures our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20) we have the comfort of knowing that our eternal state is not some non-corporeal (no physical body) netherworld where all identity is lost while we're swept into some pool of incomprehensible oneness.

So for Christians the resurrection of Christ becomes the source of great comfort. For as sure as Christ defeated death in His own resurrection, He has procured that same victory for His bride; and this to the point of mockery.

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."⁵⁵ "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

I occasionally enjoy watching old movies. Recently I was watching a movie made in the early thirties. Even a movie that old displayed the pomp and splendor of Hollywood. Everybody was rich with energy and alive with enthusiasm. I couldn't help reflect, however, over the reality that virtually everybody in that movie was probably dead. The resurrection is life's only happy ending.

What We Learn

Surely the resurrection is the good news of the gospel. But is not merely to produce idle comfort that the Bible speaks of the resurrection; it also carries a call to action. The above passage (1 Corinthians 15:54-57) ends with a charge:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The knowledge of the blessings of the resurrection should excite Christians to their labors in the Lord.

In the sixth chapter of Romans Paul writes of the Christian being united in the likeness of Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:5). We are therefore freed from the curse of the law (Romans 8:2) and freed from the bondage of sin (Romans 6:7). These truths all properly belong to the above section—the blessings of the resurrection.

But Paul had a purpose in informing believers of these blessings. It was not to seduce us to slothfulness. The knowledge of this great blessing (the blessing of a freely given holy standing before God) becomes the impetus for holy living. Observe how Paul tells believers how they are to think of themselves (reckon themselves) followed by the call to action.

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.¹³ And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:11-13).

In other words, know who you are and behave accordingly. Or, as the Apostle Paul states elsewhere,

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called (Ephesians 4:1).

Of all the lessons and responses we should have to this wonderful news, nothing takes precedence over the praise of God by the objects of His grace.

I will praise Thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto Thee. ² I will worship toward Thy holy temple, and praise Thy name for Thy lovingkindness and for Thy truth: for Thou hast magnified Thy word above all Thy name (Psalm 138:1, 2).

There are numerous reasons for which we see the Lord of glory praised. They all are ancillary to the resurrection of Christ of whom the heavenly host sings,

You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood (Revelation 5:9).

Conclusion

The resurrection was a genuine historical event—arguably the turning point—not merely in God’s plan of redemption—but the turning point in history. The blessings of this event are wide and deep enough to be the subject of every sermon ever given. And these blessings should stir the believer up to a life of service, praise, and holiness unto the Lord.

Questions For Study

1. Why preach as a dying man to dying men (page 1)?
2. How is there substance and specificity to God's grace (page 1)?
3. Discuss the different aspects of God's covenant promise (pages 1, 2).
4. What makes the resurrection the lynchpin of the Christian faith (page 2)?
5. Discuss the fundamental aspects of the resurrection (page 3).
6. How do these fundamental aspects relate to the blessings of the resurrection (pages 3, 4)?
7. What are the blessings of the resurrection for believers (pages 4, 5)?
8. What should the knowledge of the resurrection evoke in Christians (page 5)?