

THE EASTER SEASON: CELEBRATING THE JUSTIFICATION OF GOD

Introduction

Mine may have been a unique experience, but I don't think so. Growing up and being educated in what would be considered solid, conservative, American evangelical circles, I heard much about the cross of Christ but very little about the resurrection. Don't get me wrong. The cross of Christ is certainly of central importance to the Christian faith. But I always wondered what the big deal was about the resurrection. Easter Sunday mornings were always focused on the fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Stories about the Devil speaking to the grave between the crucifixion and resurrection would be presented. People would become excited to hear that Jesus was raised from the dead. Cascades of "Amens" would roll down like waters from the congregation. But what did it all mean? Yes, Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. But why? Was this just a display of the awesome power of God; the greatest miracle ever performed? Or was it something more?

The preaching of the Apostles in the book of Acts puzzled me even more. Their preaching focused on the resurrection. In Acts 2 Peter preaches that the Jews by the predetermined counsel of God crucified Jesus by wicked hands. But God has raised him from the dead. Then Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians spends a great deal of time focusing on the resurrection of Jesus and what that means about the believers' future resurrection. Here Paul is tying our Christian hope to the bodily resurrection of Jesus and our bodily resurrection on the last day. I was confused. What did that matter? I thought our hope as Christians was simply to leave this body behind and spend eternity in heaven without a body. On the one hand we vehemently defended the bodily resurrection of Jesus (and well we should!). But on the other hand we were looking for the hope of not having a body.

Over the years and with many faithful teachers, I have begun to skim the surface in understanding the importance of the resurrection of our Lord. With that understanding has come a deeper appreciation of the hope of the Christian faith: the resurrection of our bodies. Comprehending these truths has also helped me to realize the benefit of the Church emphasizing and celebrating the victory of God in the resurrection of Jesus within a yearly cycle. With these things in mind I want to summarize briefly the importance of the resurrection of Jesus, why the Church has traditionally celebrated the Easter season as it does, and, finally, the hope that the resurrection of Jesus provides for us, his people. Even if your experience was not exactly like mine, I pray that you will once again be drawn into and celebrate the victory of God in the resurrection of Jesus.

THE RESURRECTION IS NECESSARY FOR GOD TO BE VINDICATED OR JUSTIFIED

"Wait just a minute," you might say after reading this heading. "God answers to no one. He doesn't need to be vindicated. He is not a sinner, so he doesn't need to be justified." Well, of course, God is the supreme and ultimate authority and doesn't give an account for his deeds to any creature. Most assuredly God is not a sinner. He doesn't need to be forgiven. But God must be vindicated ("cleared of all blame") or justified. He must vindicate himself because he has bound himself to do certain things. If he doesn't do those things, then he is either powerless or a liar; neither of which can be true about our faithful God who created the heavens and the earth. The way that God vindicates or justifies himself is through the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus is not raised, then God has not kept his promises. If God has not kept his promises, then he is either

unrighteous or impotent; neither of which is true.

How is it then that the resurrection of Jesus is God's vindication? In order to understand this we must understand God's purposes from the opening chapters of history. When God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, he did so for a purpose. Creation was not a finished product in one sense. Yes, God created all that there is in six days, but he also placed his image, man, within what he had made for the purpose of reflecting his Creator. As such, creation became a project for man. Man, according to God's creation and blessing, was to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth and subduing it (Gen 1.26-28). Man was to image God as a creator. Just as God took an unformed and unfilled creation and formed and filled it, so his image was to form and fill the world. In this way man would properly reflect the image of his God. Creation was to head toward greater glory. The whole earth was to be developed and filled with glory. In order for man to do this, he would need to heed God's word (i.e., live by faith). As he did this, God would continue to bless his work until his purposes had been completed in the world.

But something went terribly wrong; something that brought frustration to the purposes of creation. Adam refused to obey God and submitted himself to the word of the creature rather than the word of the Creator. Sin entered the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men (Rom 5.12). The original purpose of creation was for the world to be full of life. But now death brought on by sin is in the world. Creation's purpose cannot be completed in this condition.

This poses a situation that must be dealt with. The big question that looms over the whole circumstance is this: "Will God's purposes for creation ultimately be frustrated?" Or, to put it another way, "Will God be defeated?" Some might respond at this point and say, "Well, God is powerful enough that he could have just snuffed everything out." This would have, most definitely, shown his great power. But, this would have also been admitting to some sort of defeat. God is not like the big, powerful bully that loses to a scrawny child at chess and then beats him up. Even if he had done this, it wouldn't change the fact that he lost the chess game. Raw might does not produce victory that is needed. If God had wiped the slate clean, he would have been admitting that his purposes for his creation were forever lost. His starting over again would have conceded a form of victory to sin. God can't do that. Not because he is egocentric but because he is a God of love. He cannot let the expression of his love—his creation—be ultimately desecrated by that which destroys it. No, it must be transformed and his original purposes for it must be realized.

The question is, "How does God fulfill his purpose for creation in a manner that is consistent with his proclamations about sin and death?" Death must occur. But if death occurs how can the life-purpose of creation be realized? The answer is resurrection. From the time of the Garden God made certain that this would always be a possibility. When he drove man out of the Garden he was specifically keeping man away from the Tree of Life, lest he eat of that tree and live forever (Gen 3.22). God graciously kept man from the awful fate of living forever in this state of death in order that there might be a possibility of resurrection. In doing this God would be able to carry out his just sentence while also accomplishing his purpose for the creation: life.

Now before concluding the story, a few things need to be affirmed here from the beginning of creation. First, *God's creation is good and worthy to be restored*. From Genesis 1 we read God's evaluation of his creation: it is good. When he finishes his creation he sees it and declares that it is all very good. Evil is not to be associated with that which is material or physical. What God has created—the physical and temporal world—is good. This means, among other things, that our bodies are not evil. Bodies are not "prisons for the soul" from which we

need to be set free. Our bodies are not that which we need to rid ourselves of for all of eternity. This is not to say that creation need not be transformed. Creation has been corrupted by sin and needs transformation. But this transformation is not because the physical is corrupt in itself. God created us as physical beings and created a very material world by his Spirit proclaiming it all “very good.” The material world *is* spiritual; i.e., created, formed, filled, and sustained by the Spirit. His creation is the expression of his love not his disdain. It merited his approval. Our thoughts need to be shaped by what he says about creation.

Second, *sin is what distorts and destroys God’s good creation*. Again, material creation as material is not evil. Sin brings death. Sin rips apart that which belongs together. Sin is what comes in and frustrates God’s purpose for creation. As Paul says in Romans 8 that creation was subjected to futility. The creation now groans and travails, waiting for the revelation of the sons of God (i.e., in the resurrection of our bodies). Sin’s entrance into the world and death through sin means that creation needs redemption. Creation needs to be rescued from its futility and delivered so that its purpose can be realized.

So, creation is fundamentally good. Sin distorts and destroys creation. But, third, *God will overcome the problem of sin and fulfill his original purpose for the creation*. God did not give up on *his* world. Even though his son, Adam, sinned and handed over his particular authority to the serpent, God would not let the world be ultimately destroyed. God had a purpose, and that purpose would be realized. The promises of God concerning the restoration and maturation of creation form the context of what it means for God to be justified. God is just or righteous when God does what he says he will do. What God promises from the beginning and throughout the Scriptures is that he will restore creation and bring it to its intended purpose. This is nothing less than the salvation of the world. (This doesn’t mean that every single individual in the world will ultimately be saved. God saving the world means that those who would destroy the world through their rebellion must be cast out. Therefore, God sending people to hell is part and parcel to his saving the world.)

The fact that God’s righteousness involves salvation is seen clearly in the many parallels between righteousness and salvation in Scripture, especially in Isaiah’s prophecy. We hear the parallel in Isaiah 46.13, for example, “*I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off; My salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, For Israel My glory*” (emphasis added). Again in Isaiah 51.5, “*My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust*” (emphasis added). Many other references could be added, but I think you can get the idea. God’s righteousness is demonstrated when he acts to fulfill his promises to save. When God reveals his righteousness, his salvation, he is, at that time, vindicated or justified.

God promised in the Garden scene in Genesis 3 that he would save. He promised this when he promised to place enmity between the woman and the serpent and between her seed and his seed. The seed of the serpent would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, but the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the seed of the serpent (Gen 3.15). Sin must be dealt with. The just penalty for sin must be exacted. But for God to gain the victory there must be resurrection on the other side.

Later in Genesis, when God is cutting a covenant with Abraham, God binds himself to restore creation as he intended it. That which had been introduced by sin would be dealt with and the world would be restored to proper order. God would have his son, a new Adam, ruling over the creation, completing its purpose. The fact that God bound himself to this is seen clearly in a partial commentary on this scene in Hebrews 6.13-20. God swore by himself because he could swear by no greater. (Men must take oaths in God’s name because God is greater.) By two

unchangeable things—God himself and God’s word—the promise to Abraham was confirmed. That word cannot be broken. God will vindicate himself.

How will God do all of this? Again, the problem of sin must be conquered. The only way to do that is through death and resurrection. God, in his great love, does not send another to express that love. God clothes himself in flesh—with his creation—and comes to bring about the salvation promised. He does so by dealing with the death that sin deserved at the cross. But dying in and of itself is no special thing. All men die or will die. If Jesus had died on the cross but not been raised, he would have simply been another failed Messiah. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then we are still in our sins (1 Cor 15.17). The resurrection of Jesus is the proclamation that sin and the death that it brings have been defeated. Jesus took the old creation corrupted by sin in Adam to the grave in his flesh. In his resurrection he transforms it bringing it to its intended purpose. The resurrection of Jesus means that God is vindicated because in it (and the proclamation of it) his righteousness is revealed (Rom 1.16). He has fulfilled his promises. He has won the victory. He is vindicated.

God’s victory is not for himself alone. God’s victory and vindication in Christ are for his whole creation and particularly his people. That is, when God does what he does to win the victory, we participate in that victory by being a part of that new creation formed in Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5.17 (literally), “If someone is in Christ, new creation!” We enjoy God’s victory because we are the purpose for which God fought the battle. We are the creation that is being redeemed. He will not forsake us to the enemy. He can’t. His name is at stake.

THE OLD COVENANT SHADOWS AND THE SUBSTANCE OF CHRIST

The victory of God in Christ, while a surprising historical event, was something that had been expected and anticipated by the Law and the Prophets. Again Paul tells us that the death and resurrection of Jesus happened “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15.3). The problem many in our day have when we come across this passage is that there is no explicit statement in the former Scriptures that speak about the resurrection of Jesus. There is no prophecy that says directly, “This one will die upon a cross and on the third day he will rise again from the dead.” Paul’s “according to the Scriptures,” thus, means that we must read the Scriptures in the way that Paul (and the whole church at that time) read the Scriptures. When we do that, we find the death and resurrection of Jesus all over the place. It is in the whole warp and woof of the fabric of Scripture. We find it in structures, themes, and patterns in the story of Scripture.

One particular pattern that conveys the prophecy of Christ’s death and resurrection (and all that results from them) is the feast cycle in Israel. This short article is not the place to get into all of the details of the feasts in Israel, but we need to be aware that these feasts give us an expanded explanation of what is going on in the life and work of Jesus. We understand the purpose and meaning of the resurrection as we understand how God anticipated it through the shadows of the Old Covenant. All of the details coalesce in Christ. He is the dense retelling of every detail, and every detail adds to our understanding of who Christ is and what he has done.

This is one of the reasons that the church has traditionally celebrated the Easter or Pascha season as it has. The celebration of the Resurrection season roughly follows the feast cycle. But that feast cycle is seen as fulfilled in Christ. Therefore, we do not celebrate it the same way. We celebrate it as it has been fulfilled.

One thing that needs to be understood before proceeding with the explanation of the Easter season is the primacy of the weekly Lord’s Day. Jesus took all of these many rites and rituals and fulfilled them all in himself, bringing them to their climax on the first day of the

week. So we, each Lord's Day, as we go through covenant renewal, realize the fulfillment of all of these things in Christ. All other seasons and celebrations find their reference points in the Lord's Day. No other festival or observance takes priority over the Lord's Day. This does not mean that all other observances are wrong. It simply means that they must be kept in their proper context. Our observance of other festivals during the Christian Year should serve to expand our understanding of what happens every Lord's Day when Christ comes to meet with us and feed us.

What happens on the Lord's Day in a condensed fashion goes through an expanded explanation for us in our celebration of the Easter season. Now, I must say at this point that there are some who question the use of the word "Easter." The word probably has its derivation from *Ēstre* or *Eastre*, a Teutonic goddess of springtime and, because of this fertility (Laurence Stookey, *Calendar: Christ Time for the Church*, 53). "Pascha" was the designation that the early church gave to this season of the year. This word is related to the feast of Passover. In 1 Corinthians 5.7 Paul says that Jesus is our *pascha* who has been sacrificed for us. The deliberate and obvious connection is made to the deliverance of God's people from bondage in Egypt. And so, in the church, because the resurrection is our deliverance from bondage (inexorably bound to the cross), it seemed more appropriate to call this season Pascha. The Eastern Church still uses the word, and it may need to be recovered by us in the West.

During the Christian Year, Easter or Pascha is not a single day, but a season. As I mentioned earlier, the Christian Year at this point follows the life of Christ as it fulfills the Old Covenant patterns, especially represented in the feasts of Israel. Therefore, Easter is *a week of weeks*. The Easter/Pascha season consists of fifty days. This is based originally upon the Jewish calendar of the season between Passover and Pentecost. Of course, this entire season was redefined by the death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit given on the Day of Pentecost. Early Christians understood this calendar, obviously, to have been fulfilled in the redemptive acts of Christ. The season is called "the week of weeks" because it consists of seven seven-day weeks. Thus, with each week being like a "day," it is a week of weeks. These numbers themselves are not without significance in the calendars of the Old Covenant. Seven is the number of completion or fullness. This symbolism that goes with the number is not arbitrary. Rather it is based in God's creation week. Seven days = one whole week. Thus the week is complete in seven days. Seven sevens is the fullness of fullness.

This pattern of sevens is found throughout Old Covenant legislation concerning the several types of Sabbath legislation. There was the Sabbath of the week, the Sabbath of weeks (i.e., from Passover to Pentecost/Feast of Weeks, literally "Feast of Sevens"), the Sabbath of years (i.e., one year out of seven the land was to lay dormant; cf. e.g., Exod 23.10-11), the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the year of Jubilee (cf. Lev 25.8ff.). At each Sabbath there was a time of "fulfillment." This fulfillment was a time of rest and judgment. For example, the year of Jubilee occurred at the end of "seven weeks of years" (cf. ESV, Lev 25.8). On the fiftieth year, after the completion of seven seven-year periods, there would be a time of liberation from debts, rest for the land, etc.

These references are also found in the seven sevens that occur between Passover and the Feast of Weeks/Pentecost. The Feast of Weeks was a culmination of the harvest that began just after Passover. The sheaf of firstfruits of the harvest was presented just after Passover. The Feast of Weeks is the bringing to a conclusion what was begun at the beginning of the harvest. Easter/Pascha is that full celebration of the culmination of what God has done in Christ with the full blessing of Abraham coming in the giving of the Holy Spirit as a result of the resurrection. For this reason the season runs for fifty days, culminating in Pentecost.

The Ascension of our Lord is a part of this season, occurring forty days after the Resurrection. The Ascension is not just Jesus going back to the place from which he came. The Ascension of Jesus speaks about having completed his redemptive tasks given to him by the Father. Now, he goes back to receive his reward, his inheritance. Jesus will be anointed King. He receives the name that is above every other name. He is coronated.

But just as with everything else about Jesus, his anointing is not for himself alone. Ten days after his ascension, he pours his anointing out upon his church. This is the celebration of Pentecost. Pentecost, which literally means “fifty,” is the time that we celebrate the gift of the resurrected and ascended Lord. This is the day on which Jesus poured out his Spirit upon his church, forming it into the new creation, breathing into it the breath of God. At Pentecost our Lord Jesus, in one sense, completes what he started in his death and resurrection.

OUR HOPE

From the earliest recorded history of the church’s practice outside of the New Testament, the church has celebrated this season. There were disputes concerning upon which day the season would start (i.e., whether it would follow the Passover calendar or be on Sunday), but there was no dispute about the beneficial nature of celebrating this season and reveling in the victory of God in the Resurrection. The Resurrection embodies our hope as Christians. It is good for us to be reminded regularly of that hope.

In the Resurrection of Jesus we learn that our hope is not to be disembodied one day, leaving this material world. Our hope, as we confess in the Creed, is the resurrection of the body. In this we realize that our hope does not lie in this present body as it is. No, our bodies must be redeemed (Rom 8.23). We must be transformed. But we are assured that because Jesus has been raised from the dead in an incorruptible body, so will we (1 Cor 15.35-49).

The Liturgical Season of Easter draws our focus upon and expands our understanding of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Drawing our focus to the resurrection encourages us that after the long night of the suffering (e.g., through Lent) comes the glorious victory of God’s new day.

CONCLUSION

Each of the past few Easter Sunday mornings, we have sung Psalm 98. This is a song that tells us to sing a new song because God has done something new: he has won a victory. How appropriate for us to sing it then after the preeminent victory has been won.

Oh, sing to YHWH a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. YHWH has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations. He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout joyfully to YHWH, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to YHWH with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a psalm, With trumpets and the sound of a horn; Shout joyfully before YHWH, the King. Let the sea roar, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell in it; Let the rivers clap *their* hands; Let the hills be joyful together before YHWH, For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world, And the peoples with equity.

Thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Cor 15.57)

