

“RESURRECTION PART 2”

(I Thessalonians 4:13-18; I Corinthians 15:50-57)

4.28.19

INTRODUCTION

Last week with our celebration of Easter, we saw the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundation for our faith. Today we’re going to look at his resurrection as the foundation for our future. Let’s begin!

REDEFINITION

The apostle Paul was an incredibly amazing man. Gifted and brilliant, he used the springboard of his “Damascus Road” encounter with Jesus Christ (Acts 9) to change the face of the world. He wrote just under half the books of the New Testament; 13 of the 27 books that comprise that part of the Bible flowed, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, from his head and his heart. He founded churches and spread the gospel message all over the Mediterranean basin, from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in the east to possibly as far west as Spain. There are still books being written about this guy, so profound was his influence — everything from retelling his life story to analyzing and evaluating his theology.

For our purposes today, I want to focus on one particular result of his ministry that is incredibly important: “redefinition.” What I mean by that is Paul could look at how something used to be — how it was perceived, how it was experienced and dealt with — and now, as a Christian, how he could look at the exact same thing and see something totally different. The verse that really highlights that idea is found in his second letter to the church in Corinth, where he famously said: ***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! — Paul, II Corinthians 5:17.***

So, what does “redefinition” look like; how did that “new creation” flesh out in Paul’s life? Well, let’s let him tell us in his own words — first with what his “old” life was like: ***If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless — Paul, Philippians 3:4b-6.*** But listen how Paul described those same accomplishments as “redefined” by Jesus Christ: ***[W]hatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ—Paul, Philippians 3:7-8.***

That in a nutshell described his entire Damascus-road conversion experience, when he went from the old — the proud, fearsome defender of the Jewish faith, with the literal power of life and death given him by the members of the Sanhedrin in an attempt to destroy Christianity in its infancy — to the new, to someone completely redefined by meeting Jesus Christ, literally knocked to the ground by the experience and having to be led by the hand into Damascus as a blind man, having lost the life he had but finding the one God had planned for him. Talk about “all things become new!”

THE BASIS FOR REDEFINITION

What’s amazing is that, even being completely redefined in Christ, that didn’t change the incredibly challenging opposition he faced on a virtually daily basis. Eventually, like so many others, he was murdered for his faith. And yet, he was able to consider all his life circumstances

“garbage.” In fact, in his second letter to the Corinthians, he shared what belonging to Jesus Christ ultimately meant for his life and ministry: ***Therefore we do not lose hope. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal — Paul, II Corinthians 4:16-18.*** How could he maintain that kind of attitude against all that was done to him? I believe there were two main reasons:

The first, of course, was the incredible way he was changed by that collision he had with Christ outside of Damascus. The whole point of colliding with Jesus is to be remade into somebody fundamentally different than we were before. The image of God’s Son, which is deposited in us by means of the Holy Spirit, begins to be etched into our being — a process unlike anything else in this world. Paul himself described it this way; I love how the King James says it: ***I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me — Paul, Galatians 2:20 (KJV).***

And the second reason that contributed to the drastic change in Paul’s perspectives was something he said to the Corinthian church just prior to his commenting on his “light and momentary troubles”: ***[W]e know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to Himself — Paul, II Corinthians 4:14.*** What was he saying? Simply this: that Christians then and, by extension, Christians now, have something to look forward to beyond the realities of this life — a future to anticipate, an everlasting eternity that should completely overwhelm any moments that cause us trouble in the here and now. To Christians then, and to us now, Paul was talking about heaven.

WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SAY ABOUT HEAVEN?

Paul wanted the members of the many churches he had started to know that, despite the troubles they were experiencing, and the troubles that may lay ahead, there was an eternal victory celebration that would make it all so worthwhile.

Of course, while He was here on earth, Jesus had gotten this celestial ball rolling. In the moments just prior to heading over to the Garden of Gethsemane and the horrors that lay ahead, Jesus had said to His disciples: ***In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also — Jesus Christ, John 14:2-3 (NASB).***

And that message was affirmed to them in the moments after Christ’s ascension as He returned to heaven; remember what Luke tells us? ***[Jesus] was taken up before [the disciples’] very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven” — Acts 1:9-11.*** What an amazing relief that must have been for them as they had watched their beloved Master leave them, to know that they would see Him again.

As the early church suffered through one persecution after another, it was the promise of heaven that would both sustain them and give them perspective by offering a comparison between difficult “moments” on earth and an “eternity” of joy in heaven.

Peter, one of the disciples who would have heard Jesus’ promises of the joy that lay before them, excitedly shared with his readers that *in keeping with [God’s] promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells — II Peter 3:13*. While he acknowledged the trials they were suffering, he was able to give them the encouragement that *when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away — I Peter 5:4*. Of course, those trials often led to death for the people of the early church. But heaven was obviously waiting for them. As Paul assured them as he considered his own life: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain — Paul, Philippians 1:21*.

For the early church, with heaven so much on their minds, they began employing a word whenever they met or parted from one another: *maranatha* — a two-word Aramaic phrase that meant, “Our Lord, come.” While they realized their place in the Lord’s ministry, they were sustained by their confidence in the Lord’s future. But it was Paul who gave the clearest picture of the future that the Christian church had to look forward to, and he did it in writing to two of the churches he had founded — the church in Thessalonica and the church in Corinth.

In his first letter to the Thessalonian church, he wrote: *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words — Paul, I Thessalonians 4:13-18*.

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, he wrote: *I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “DEATH HAS BEEN SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY.” “WHERE, O DEATH, IS YOUR VICTORY? WHERE, O DEATH, IS YOUR STING?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ — Paul, I Corinthians 15:50-57 (quoting Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14)*.

Together, these two scriptures tell us about an incredible, world-shattering moment that’s on its way, and it’s all encapsulated in one word: “rapture.”

What’s interesting is that the word “rapture” is not even used in our English-speaking Bibles; when Paul is writing to the Thessalonians and talking about those who are alive at that moment being “caught up” together with those Christians who have previously died but will then be

resurrected, he uses the Greek word “harpazo,” which means “to snatch suddenly, to grab without warning.” But obviously we don’t talk about “the harpazo”; we talk about the “rapture.” The word “rapture” comes from the Latin “rapturo,” which means to “catch up” or “take away.” It is a holdover from the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible that Catholics have used since the fifth century, and it has become the way of expressing this particular end-times event. The exciting bottom line? Whether by resurrection or rapture, Christians have a date with heaven.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD TO?

According to these Scriptures, Christians are going to have an incredibly special moment that welcomes them into the promised eternity of heaven that Jesus pledged to all His followers. Some amazing things to consider:

It is going to happen “quick.” It is going to happen so quick (in the “twinkling of an eye”) that, for anyone looking at a Christian, it is going to seem that they have disappeared.

All Christians — all believers of the church age — will be heading to heaven in the Rapture, the dead in Christ rising first, followed by those still alive when that event takes place. The world will very quickly see two distinct groups: true believers, and the rest. Those who God knows have surrendered to His Son will be taken home; the rest will be, in the words of the famous book series, “left behind.”

All Christians will be transformed from the mortality of earth to the immortality of heaven. As Paul said to the church at Philippi: ***[O]ur citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body — Paul, Philippians 3:20-21.***

The best part of all this? Our lives in Christ will never end; as Paul triumphantly notes: ***And so we will be with the Lord forever — Paul, I Thessalonians 4:17b.*** As the words of the wonderful Christian hymn “Amazing Grace” celebrate: “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.” No wonder, when Paul wrote to Titus, that he called all these things that we have to look forward to our ***blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ — Paul, Titus 2:13b.***

And, according to Scripture, as Christians, we have even more to look forward to: In heaven, we will be able to see God — Father and Son! In the OT, Job found great comfort in that hope in the midst of his suffering: ***“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth. And after all my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! — Job 19:25-27.*** And according to David: ***As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness — David, Psalm 17:15.***

This is echoed in the NT by the apostle John in his writings in Revelation, where he notes: ***The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads — Revelation 22:3b-4.*** And not only will we see the Father, but John in his first epistle tells us we will see the Son as well: ***Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is — I John 3:2.***

SO WHY A MESSAGE ON THE RAPTURE?

For one thing, it's in our statement of beliefs. If we say we believe something, it's probably good to talk about it. But, more importantly, it should be a loud and clear reminder that this world is not all there is. The fact is this world will one day come to an end. But eternity in heaven will never end, and no amount of mess or conflict in this world will change that outcome. The incredible God we worship every Sunday will see His perfect plans through to completion. No politician, no movement, no leader, no evil, can overcome His ability to have His will be done. As He Himself said so emphatically through the prophet Isaiah: ***"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please'"*** — ***God speaking, Isaiah 46:10***. That's why when time finally comes to an end, we will realize that the appropriate way to view time was never in the context of "history" but rather in the context of "His story." The future, just like the past and the present, is all about Him.

For the saved and unsaved: One of the dangers in dealing with the Rapture is the temptation to think that it is some far-off future distant event, like sending men to Mars or something. Is it a future event? Yes — absolutely; it hasn't happened yet. But far off? Why? The fact is, at some point in real time, possibly within our time, the Rapture will be two weeks out . . . two days out . . . a couple of hours . . . less than five minutes. The reality is that the Rapture is not on a timeframe; in other words, there are no events to serve as kind of a "run-up" to that moment. All we know is, at a moment in time, known only to God, an estimated 1-2 billion people present on this planet are going to be present no longer. And if the Bible has taught us anything, it has taught us that God intervenes in human history. He did it with creation, He did it with miracles, He did it with prophets, He did it with His own Son — real moments in real time. And likewise, he'll do it with the Rapture.

For those of us who are saved, don't we have family, friends and loved ones that we want to have make that journey with us? And aren't we surrounded by neighbors, co-workers and other acquaintances? You think the Lord would like to see them saved, to be instantly gone from here, instantly home with Him — forever? The reality of the coming of the Rapture should inspire us to increase and intensify our efforts to reach everyone we can with the gospel by inspiring us to seek to see the world the way Jesus sees it: ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Luke 19:10***.

For the unsaved: The Rapture will be just as real for the unsaved as it will be for the saved — only with entirely different outcomes. The saved will be gone from this place; they will be nowhere to be found. The unsaved will be here, though — left behind to face a time of trouble such as the world has never experienced before. But for right now, we live in what is called the "age of grace," when the Holy Spirit is actively working through the church — that is, through all those who are born again — to communicate the good news of the gospel to all who have yet to receive and surrender to it.

If you are unsaved, what should you do? You should take one more moment to understand exactly what it is that Jesus Christ did for you, and to understand that Jesus Christ is the only way by which heaven will ever be found. Rejecting Him means rejecting the only possibility of ever being seen by God as though you have never sinned. Why? Jesus alone lived a life that satisfied God and His law's requirement of perfection — and then He offered to give that perfection to us! He gave His life on the cross and essentially said by so doing, "Here; take it—it's yours!" As Paul wrote so clearly in his second letter to the church at Corinth: ***God made Him who had no***

sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God — Paul, II Corinthians 5:21.

The result of surrendering to God through Jesus Christ? God will now see you exactly as He sees His Son — perfect in every way, as though you had never sinned. As Paul so wondrously said to the Colossian Christians: *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through (His) death (on the cross) to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation — Paul, Colossians 1:21-22.* And the wonderful news for all those who have surrendered their lives to God through the work on the cross of Jesus Christ, as Paul shared with the church at Rome: *[T]here is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death — Paul, Romans 8:1-2.* Because of what Jesus promised as a result of His work on the cross, I can know that I have a home waiting for me in heaven, where I will spend the rest of eternity in the joyous presence of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Praise His name!

CONCLUSION

It's coming. In fact, every day that passes, it's another day closer — and the fact is, the arrival of the Rapture will be as unannounced as is the end of our own lives. I no more know that I'm alive tomorrow than I know whether or not the Rapture happens tomorrow. But it is coming; it will happen. As Jesus Christ Himself said, in His final words in Scripture: *“Yes, I am coming soon” — Jesus Christ, Revelation 22:20a.* If He was coming soon 2,000 years ago, imagine how soon He's coming now. Is your family ready? Are your friends ready? Are you ready? Let's pray!